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NEXT ISSUE ON SALE: February 21, 2019



CES 2019, p18

Welcome

'I didn't know so many "blockbuster" movies could be released in one year,' says an *HCC* reader on our Facebook page, about films coming to cinema in 2019. And they have a point – there are plenty of appetising titles on the horizon (see p22), and the traditional notion of the 'Blockbuster Summer' has gone out the window. **Big-budget movies now launch almost all year round**, as Hollywood fights back against smallscreen binge-watching. More so than ever, the industry is banking on films that demand to be seen in the biggest and best theatres.

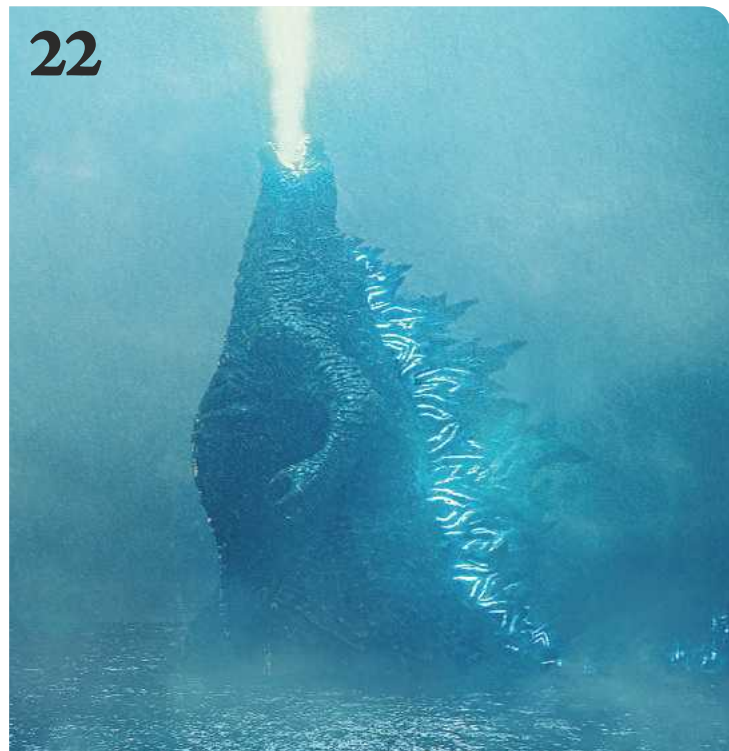


This is all great news for home cinema owners, as it ensures a steady feed of audio-visual heavyweights arriving on 4K Blu-ray. And if you're on the hunt for new display hardware to see you through the coming year, TV manufacturers are joining in the fun too. Turn to p18 to see the flagship 4K and 8K screens launched at CES 2019 this month.

Mark Craven
Editor



MENU



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The experienced TV tester cut his teeth as an early HCC staffer



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BULLETIN

→ **NEWS HIGHLIGHTS** ACOUSTIC ENERGY 100 Series speaker range boosted by new flagship model **OPPO** Ultra HD Blu-ray players receive HDR10+ update **DYNAUDIO** Evoke speakers promise 'perfect balance' of performance and price **NEWS X10** The hottest news stories in bite-sized chunks **FIRST MAN** Neil Armstrong biopic blasts off in 4K HDR **& MORE!**

Roll up, roll up!

LG Signature OLED TV R → www.lg.com/uk

As statement products go LG's new TV R is quite a stunner, implementing the brand's rollable OLED display technology into a premium consumer proposition. The 65in 4K resolution panel rises from its industrial-styled chassis unit at the touch of a button – for movie/TV watching, select LG's Full View option. Zero View hides the screen, turning the TV R into a standalone speaker via the cabinet's 4.2-channel Dolby Atmos array. Line View, meanwhile, partially unrolls the display, allowing for app-based fun from the UI dashboard. Pricing of the set is unannounced, but we know we want one.



LG's rollable TV in Full View mode (left) and Zero View (above)

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Aiming higher

Acoustic Energy AE120
→ www.acoustic-energy.co.uk



Acoustic Energy celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2017 by relaunching its AE109 floorstanding speaker, and ushering in a new 100 Series range with centre and subwoofer options. Now it's gone further with the AE120, which retains the slender dimensions of the AE109 but ups the driver count, adding dedicated bass units to become a true three-way model. Pricing is £800-per-pair for the pictured walnut finish, while satin black is £850 – step up to 5.1, with AE100s on surround duty, for around £1,500.

Invisible home theatre



Boasting that 'invisible speakers are no longer an audio compromise,' Stealth Acoustics will launch its LRx85 in-wall speaker, with paintable front panel for a seamless installation, at ISE in February. A two-part design, the speaker adds a

2 x 8in woofer bass panel below its mid/HF unit, resulting in a claimed response of 35Hz-18kHz. An active model is also offered, incorporating a two-channel DSP amplifier – the company suggests using this for multi-speaker Atmos setups. Price is TBC. www.stealthacoustics.com

Ear's an idea



Bang & Olufsen has updated its 'true wireless' E8 headphones.

Now called E8 2.0 (and priced £300),

these active, cable-free in-ears add a wireless charging feature to their carry-case – place the case on B&O's charging pad (available separately) to rejuice the 'phones. The Jakob Wagner-designed earbuds pack 5.7mm electro-dynamic drivers, Bluetooth 4.2 connectivity and offer finger-tip control over track selection and the 'Transparency' modes of the brand's companion app. www.bang-olufsen.com

Hi-fi focus for Bristol show

But keep an ear out for subwoofer and Dolby Atmos demos too...



The Bristol Marriot Hotel City Centre is the place to be in February if you want to audition some new audio hardware, as the 32nd edition of the Bristol Hi-Fi

Show touches down.

As usual, attendees can expect sonic demonstrations from a plethora of UK and global brands, with speaker marques Bowers & Wilkins, DALI, Focal, Jamo, KEF and Monitor Audio – and component purveyors Arcam, Mark Levinson, Primare and Naim – among the monster list of exhibiting companies.

New products will also break cover – for instance, Dynaudio has confirmed that the show will mark the 'first listen' of its Evoke loudspeaker range [see p17].

For AV-hedz, however, there looks like being an absence of cinematic visuals to savour. JVC, Epson and Optoma have all previously showcased home cinema projectors at Bristol, but none are in

attendance this year. And last Summer the organisers announced the show was to be named the Bristol Hi-Fi Show, replacing its previous Sound & Vision Bristol moniker.

Says the Bristol Hi-Fi Show: 'Although it started very much as a two-channel event it morphed into showcasing a lot of home cinema electronics, followed by a lot of vision products, necessitating the name change to Sound & Vision. But now the trend has reversed somewhat and the show has become more two-channel again, which has left the equal billing of Sound and Vision a little misleading. We also received valuable feedback from attendees, often commenting on the perceived lack of home cinema.'

But while that 'lack of home cinema' applies to 4K image demos, it doesn't cover the audio side. Brands such as REL, JL Audio and SVS will be rattling the Marriot's rafters with subwoofer auditions, and HCC also expects SVS and Emotiva to team up for a Dolby Atmos experience via their UK distributor Karma AV.



Ticket info

The Bristol Hi-Fi Show runs from Friday February 22 to Sunday February 24. Tickets are on sale now or available on the day. Online prices are £12.50 for a single day, £24.20 for a two-day pass, or £34.88 for three days, with concessions for students/over 65s. Visit www.bristolshow.co.uk for more information.

Playlist...

Team HCC spins up its disc picks of the month

Mission: Impossible – Fallout (UHD Blu-ray)

Two months on and 2018's most spectacular action sequel is still on near constant rotation in our movie den – and will probably remain so until *M:I 7* is released.



Final Score (All-region BD)



This enjoyable 'Die Hard in a football stadium' action flick is now on Blu-ray, joined by a look at how the filmmakers pulled it off.

A Midwinter's Tale (Netflix)



The streaming service gave fans of *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* a creepy Xmas gift with this festive special. Roll on Season Two.

Opera (Region BD)



Dario Argento's slick 1987 shocker looks absolutely sensational on this newly restored UK Blu-ray.

The Blob (Region B BD)



This vintage Steve McQueen creature-feature is a welcome addition to Criterion's UK line-up.

At the 'plex...

Heading out to see a flick?
Catch these this month

The Mule



January 25: Clint Eastwood directs and stars in this thriller about a 90-year-old Korean War veteran who resorts to running drugs for a Mexican cartel in order to stave off financial ruin.

How to Train Your Dragon: The Hidden World

February 01: The third and final instalment in DreamWorks' phenomenally popular animated franchise finds Hiccup and Toothless battling a new enemy and venturing off in search of a mythical world of dragons.

Alita: Battle Angel



February 06: Delayed from its original release in Summer 2018, Robert Rodriguez's live-action adaptation of Yukito Kishiro's classic manga finally hits the bigscreen today. Time to find out if it was worth the wait...

Oppo 4K BD gets HDR10+

Brand may have discontinued disc hardware, but continues to tweak

With player prices hitting £650 for the UDP-203 and £1,400 for the UDP-205 when they launched in 2017, those who shelled out on Oppo's UHD machines would have been right to have worried when the company shuttered its home entertainment division, **Oppo Digital**, last Summer.

Though Oppo pledged to maintain support, both in terms of in-warranty and out-of-warranty repairs, and firmware updates – the latter would be tackled 'from time to time', owners were told – most wondered whether the players could end up left behind by format and feature developments.

An 'official' firmware release for the UDP-203 and UDP-205 (UDP20XEU-60-0625) in July 2018 allayed these fears, with Oppo adding MQA support to the UDP-205's USB DAC, and refining Dolby Vision playback (particular with regard to Sony TV hardware).

And there was more good news for Oppo owners over Christmas when the company launched a further 'Public Beta' firmware update for the two players. Made available on December 31, the update (version UDP20XEU-64-1221B) enables HDR10+ playback and makes 'general fixes and disc compatibility improvements, based on recent and upcoming UHD Blu-ray releases as well as user-submitted samples.'

Zip it up

The update is downloadable (as a zipped 132MB file) from www.oppodigital.co.uk.

It can then be uploaded to an Oppo player via USB. First, however, owners have to ensure their machine is at least running firmware version UDP20XEU-45-0605 – those still using version 42-0329 or earlier need to install that first.

As a Beta update, the new firmware is not currently available via network, meaning your player will not notify you of its availability.

'This release is still a Beta test version, not an official release,' says Oppo. 'Use it only if you would like to experiment with the new features and improvements.'

The company also says there is 'a very small chance of the new features and improvements not working properly,' and says, if that happens, owners should contact Oppo.

As reported last issue, Pioneer will be updating its own premium 4K BD fleet with HDR10+ support by Spring 2019. Those on tighter budgets seeking

HDR10+ should turn to Panasonic's DP-UB420 (£250) or the £400 DP-UB820, reviewed on p66.



Oppo's UDP-205 is now ready for HDR10+ 4K Blu-rays

Edifier soundbar has you surrounded

HDMI-equipped S90HD aims for cinematic immersion

Chinese audio brand Edifier has launched an upper-tier home cinema soundbar with external surround speakers, the S90HD.

Due to hit shops priced around £750, it's a 4.1-channel solution, combining its main stereo 'bar' and surround modules with a wireless subwoofer. The system claims an overall frequency response of 40Hz-20kHz.

The mature-looking soundbar (it uses a curved-edged, wooden enclosure) features a titanium dome tweeter and dual midbass drivers for each (L/R) channel, while the surrounds use a single full-range driver.

The S90HD has Dolby and DTS decoding onboard, and connections include twin HDMI inputs, an HDMI ARC output, and coaxial, optical, stereo phono and 3.5mm audio inputs. Bluetooth (aptX) is also an option.

The 'bar's front fascia offers a volume control and display window signifying the current source. The system is also shipped with a full-size remote granting access to Edifier's Movie, Music and Game sound presets. www.edifier.com/int/en

The S90HD's wireless subwoofer uses an 8in bass driver



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Extras...

Small items that could make a big impression...

The Howling: Studies in the Horror Film



Anybody who has listened to any of the Blu-ray chat-tracks Lee Gambin has appeared on will know

just what to expect from his new book about Joe Dante's 1981 werewolf movie. Informed and informative, this fascinating tome offers a scene-by-scene analysis of *The Howling*, peppered with rare photos and extensive new interviews with the cast and crew. It's guaranteed to leave fans of the film, erm, howling with delight.

LEGO Star Wars: Death Star Escape



If the £400 asking price for LEGO's 2016 Death Star set was a little too rich for your wallet, then

this new build will be right up your street. Selling for just £25 and recreating the iconic scene from *A New Hope* where Luke and Leia swing to safety across a chasm inside the Death Star, it uses 329 pieces and includes Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia and Stormtrooper minifigures.

Firefly Encyclopedia



Fans of Joss Whedon's short-lived sci-fi series will love this over-sized £35 hardback. Inside is

a detailed guide to the stories; in-depth character studies; explorations of the show's science, technology and cultures; and a series of script extracts accompanied by analysis from author Monica Valentinelli.



The 2018 results are in!

Disney dominates at box office, *The Greatest Showman* rules on disc

Thanks to a trio of Marvel titles, a Pixar sequel and a *Star Wars* prequel, Disney towered above rival Hollywood majors at the box office in 2018.

Superhero smash-hit *Avengers: Infinity War* led the charge, amassing just over \$2bn worldwide, including \$678m in the US. Franchise partner *Black Panther*, meanwhile, outpaced it on native soil to earn \$700m as part of a \$1.346bn global take.

Backed up by the *The Incredibles 2* (\$1.24bn), *Ant-Man and the Wasp* (\$622m) and *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (\$392m), Disney ended 2018 with a dominant market share, including 26 per cent in the US, according to Box Office Mojo. By comparison, Warner Bros. (which released titles including *A Star is Born*, *Aquaman* and *The Meg*) grabbed a 16 per cent slice, while Universal Studios' 15 per cent share was primarily due to the success of *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* and *Dr Seuss' The Grinch*.

As for physical/streamed media (and on this side of the Atlantic), the annual report from the British Association for Screen Entertainment (BASE) found UK retailers enjoying a bumper year. The home entertainment market grew by around 10 per cent, helped in part by the UK's love of singing along to musicals – *The Greatest Showman*, starring Hugh Jackman, sold over 2.68m copies, with 72 per cent coming from physical media. ABBA-infested sequel *Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again*, meanwhile, had raced to second place in the overall end-of-year chart despite a November release, and sold over 1.1m physical copies.

Rounding out the top five slots on the Official Charts Company's Blu-ray and DVD list are *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* in third place, *Avengers: Infinity War* in fourth, and *Paddington 2* in fifth.

Getting serious about disc

BASE's report also illustrates healthy growth for Blu-ray and 4K Blu-ray, even while DVD remains a home entertainment stalwart, stating: 'An increasing proportion of consumers are seeking out premium disc formats, with Blu-ray accounting



Robert Price, BASE Chairman: 'It's fortifying to note the huge increase in audience engagement with digital delivery'

for 24.3 per cent of physical disc market value.' This comes even as the average selling price of a Blu-ray release has increased by

around 5 per cent.

'Serious film and TV collectors' appetites for restored versions of catalogue classics is seen in the continued success of Arrow Films' Blu-ray remasters of titles like *Big Trouble in Little China*, says BASE, '...and BBC Studios' successes with *Doctor Who* that has seen classic episodes of the sci-fi show lapped up by fans.'

As for Ultra HD Blu-ray, the industry body suggests the format is 'excelling'. There are now 330 titles available to UK buyers, with sales accounting for around 13 per cent of total Blu-ray spend and yearly growth judged to be 160 per cent. Ten titles are responsible for around 40 per cent of sales, and read like an AV-Holic's week off work: *Avengers: Infinity War*; *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*; *Blade Runner 2049*; *Deadpool 2*; *Thor: Ragnarok*; *The Greatest Showman*; *Solo: A Star Wars Story*; *Black Panther*; *Ready Player One*; and *Mission Impossible - Fallout*.

Unsurprisingly, what was a good year for physical media was also a record-breaker for digital platforms. EST (Electronic Sell-Thru) film sales recorded a 'staggering' 36 per cent year-on-year growth, based on combined data from Official Charts Company, Futuresource Consulting and IHS Markit. And around 63 per cent of consumers are now opting to stream or rent film and TV content through platforms such as Netflix, Amazon and Sky Store.

Says Robert Price, BASE Chairman and Managing Director of Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment: 'As habits continue to change, it is fortifying to note the huge increase in audience engagement with digital delivery in the last 12 months, and in the continued strength of premium formats such as Blu-ray and 4K UHD.'

This month's top 10 news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...



1 Rise of the machines

This year's CES tech show (see p18) saw LG's CLOi GuideBot become the first robot to ever help deliver a CES keynote speech. Taking to the stage alongside LG Electronics President and CTO Dr. I.P. Park, CLOi was only on hand to illustrate LG's plans to 'unlock the potential of A.I. technologies' and develop a Robot Service Delivery Platform (RSDP) – and most definitely not to subjugate mankind for our new robotic overlords.

2 We're in this together

Also at CES, AV brands Hisense, Panasonic, Samsung and TCL confirmed the formation of the 8K Association, a non-profit body designed to promote the nascent 7,680 x 4,320 technology. Perhaps its first goal should be to conjure up some native 8K content...

3 MUBI signs 'prestige' movies

Curated movie streaming service MUBI has acquired 50 'prestige titles' from the Curzon film library, which will begin screening exclusively on the platform from February. As well as special seasons dedicated to auteurs like Michael Haneke and Krzysztof Kieslowski, MUBI will also focus on contemporary female filmmakers including Claire Denis, Agnes Varda and Lynne Ramsay.

4 Google gains ground

Sonos has confirmed it will add Google Assistant functionality to its Sonos Beam soundbar and Sonos One speaker later this year, joining Amazon's Alexa, which has been present on the models since launch. The company is currently beta testing the new chatty interaction, in advance of rolling out a global update.

5 Cinema Star comes home

Following a recent one-week revival at selected IMAX cinemas, Bradley Cooper's acclaimed remake of *A Star is Born* will be making its bow on DVD, Blu-ray and UHD Blu-ray on February 11. The BD and 4K discs boast Dolby Atmos sonics (the latter also adds Dolby Vision), plus three musical performances not seen in cinemas.

6 CE sales on the increase

The global market for technical consumer goods exceeded one-trillion Euros for the first time last year, according to a report from market research body GfK. This four per cent overall increase on 2017 was helped in part by the strong performance of the consumer electronics sector, which was up nearly six per cent on the previous year, with a worldwide spend of around €157 billion.

7 We are the champions!

Fox is bringing the award-winning rock biopic *Bohemian Rhapsody* to Ultra HD Blu-ray, BD and DVD in the UK on March 4. Extra features include the 'complete' *Live Aid Movie Performance* (featuring the previously unseen songs *Crazy Little Thing Called Love* and *We Will Rock You*), plus three featurettes: *Rami Malek: Becoming Freddie*, *The Look and Sound of Queen*, and *Recreating Live Aid*.

8 Game on!

According to 2018 data compiled by the ERA (Entertainment Retailers Association), the UK's video gaming market has doubled in value since 2007, and is now worth £3.84bn, which is more than the domestic video and music markets combined. We must be a nation of joystick junkies.

9 Perfect harmony

Following a preview at IFA 2018, Loewe and Vogel's have announced the latter's Next 7355 wall mount will integrate with Loewe TVs, with control over the motorised mechanism (including automatic actions) handled via the Loewe remote and user interface.

10 Ringing in the New Year

Arrow Video is bringing Hideo Nakata's J-Horror classic *Ring* to Blu-ray in the UK on March 18. The disc is based on a new 4K scan of the 35mm camera negative and comes loaded with exclusive bonus features. In addition to the standalone *Ring* Blu-ray (available in both regular and Steelbook packaging), Arrow is also releasing *The Ring Collection* (pictured), which packages the film alongside HD presentations of *Ring 2*, *Ring 0* and George Iida's 'lost' original sequel *Spiral*.



Premiere...

What's happening in the world of TV and films...

More Spidey toons set to swing into cinemas



Producer Amy Pascal has revealed that work has already begun on a sequel to animated hit *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*. A '*Spider-Women*' spin-off focusing on Gwen Stacy's Spider-Gwen, Cindy Moon's Silk and Jessica Drew's Spider-Woman is also in the works.

Vikings is history

The History Channel has revealed that its hit drama series *Vikings* will end with its sixth season, which will run through late 2019 into early 2020. However, it also confirmed that discussions about potential spin-off shows are underway.

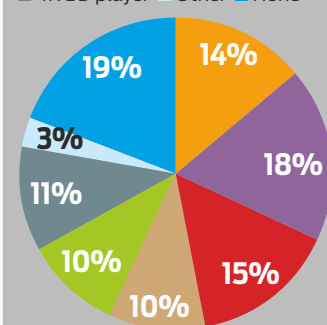
Nothing comical about this comic book movie

Spawn creator Todd MacFarlane says there will be no room for 'fun' in the movie reboot of his superhero comic, which is due to go before cameras this Summer. 'There's gonna be no fun lines in it. It's just gonna be this dark, ugly two hours worth of movie.'

We asked...

Which of the following AV items do you plan to buy in 2019?

■ Projector ■ TV ■ AVR/processor
■ Loudspeakers ■ Subwoofer
■ 4K BD player ■ Other ■ None



Results from www.homecinemachoice.com
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Fly me to the moon

First Man → Universal Pictures
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Filmmaker Damien Chazelle reunites with his *La La Land* leading man Ryan Gosling on the Neil Armstrong biopic *First Man*, which makes its UK disc debut on February 18. Extras include a commentary with Chazelle, writer Josh Singer and editor Tom Cross, a pair of deleted scenes, and eight *Making of...* featurettes. Both the Blu-ray and 4K platters feature Atmos sonics, while the Ultra HD disc adds HDR10 and Dolby Vision grading to the film's unusual mix of 16mm, 35mm and IMAX 65mm photography.



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Face to Face

Topics of discussion on the HCC Facebook page

The 2019 films you're most excited about...



Avengers: Endgame, *Glass* [pictured above], *Star Wars 9*, *Cap Marvel* and *Spider-Man*.
Robi Lee

What's Christopher Nolan working on?
Stuart Gifford

This will be the first time I'll miss a *Star Wars* movie. Thanks Disney for ruining it.
Mike Short

What you're watching on your home cinema...



Definitely the new *Mission: Impossible* movie on Blu-ray and found *Hell Night* [left] on Blu-ray yesterday!

Troy Chaske

Venom, *The House with a Clock in Its Walls* and *A Simple Favour* on 4K UHD Blu-ray.
Walter White

A Chucky festival with *Bride of Chucky*, *Seed Of Chucky*, *Curse Of Chucky* and *Cult of Chucky*.
Alan Hoare

The French Connection.
Sean D Dobson

Saturday Night Fever.
John Deal

I'll be watching *Catch and Release*, *Red Sparrow* and *Lady Bird*.
Robert Corrigan



The Meg, *Watchmen* and *Ghost Rider* [left]. Time to go a bit retro.
Steve Old

Going for *Solo...* on Saturday or maybe *Ant Man and the Wasp*.
Tony Sharrock

Star Trek.
Suminto Tjitrahadi



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Back of the 'net

Trailers, technology and more to check out on the web



Peele prepares more terror

Writer/director Jordan Peele returns with another chiller on March 15. New movie *Us*, judging from Universal Pictures' trailer, takes its cues from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and adds a dose of home invasion horror. Will it be as much of a hit as Peele's Oscar-winner *Get Out*?

youtu.be/hNCmb-4oXJA



An extra shot of audio

Denon and European AV retailer Hi-Fi Klubben have staged a surprise 5.1 demo, hiding a speaker array and AVR within a mobile coffee shop. Check out this video to see how people (including a wide-eyed toddler) react to the sound of 360-degree laser fire and roaring dinosaurs while they wait for a latte...

youtu.be/5DQj0Pg1dUo



Dirac for dummies

Arcam has launched a nine-part YouTube series of videos outlining the setup process and benefits of Dirac Live room EQ, now a feature on its AV receivers and processors. Topics covered include taking multiple measurements and reviewing the final data. Start with Part One, link below.

youtu.be/27oceswdx6Y



TOP PICK

Galaxy defenders hit London

Sony refreshes its *Men in Black* franchise with this UK-set spin-off due in cinemas June 14. Previous stars Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones are absent (although you may spot them – sort of – in the trailer...) with Chris Hemsworth and Rebecca Ferguson taking on MIB agent roles.

youtu.be/BV-WEB2oxLk



Don't pick it up!

Chloë Grace Moretz stars in suspense flick *Greta* (in cinemas April 19), which finds her do-gooding Manhattanite entangled with Isabelle Huppert's mysterious title character when she returns a bag left (deliberately?) on a subway train. Neil 'The Crying Game' Jordan directs.

youtu.be/WAEoJkL_8zU



Santa claws

Twentieth Century Fox tried to rustle up some festive goodwill for the US Blu-ray debut of *The Predator* with this bizarre, funny and rather violent stop-motion animated 'Holiday Special'. Reminiscent of *Happy Tree Friends*, it finds Santa's elves and reindeer battling the dreadlocked hunter.

youtu.be/rVrRjt69lhU

'This speaker is just right'

Dynaudio Evoke → www.dynaudio.com



Dynaudio's Evoke series comprises two floorstanders, two standmounts and a centre channel, and aims to hit what the company deems the 'Goldilocks zone – the perfect balance of performance and price.' Working towards this fairy tale goal are driver and design implementations trickled down from Dynaudio's high-end Contour and Confidence lines, although with prices reaching around £4,000-per-pair for the flagship three-way Evoke 50 tower (pictured), you might need to stick to porridge for breakfast...

TV's Big Four dazzle at CES 2019

As the technology showcase kicked off, the major AV players unveiled their latest display developments. **Steve May** and **Mark Craven** get square-eyed

Samsung pushes Micro LED

The future isn't OLED, it's not even QLED. According to Samsung, the best display technology for tomorrow is going to be Micro LED. And to prove its point, at CES 2019 it unveiled a 75in Micro LED model.

There's no launch date or price, but the brand seems to be eyeing a 2020 commercialisation.

Micro LED is a self-emissive display technology, comprising modules which 'slot' together to form a screen of any desired size or shape. There's no bezel in the traditional sense, just bricks of LED bulbs. The technology builds on The Wall, first shown by Samsung at CES a year ago.

The 75in home version (if you aspire to something bigger, Samsung also presented a 146in alternative, and a gigantic 219in iteration) is a 5K display, but as the technology is scalable, it can be more.

'4K, 5K, 8K... even 10K are possible,' we were told. You can also configure it for any ratio, although one presumes 16:9, or possibly 'Scope-style, would be the popular choices. Samsung suggests 9 x 3, 1 x 7 and 5 x 1 screen sizes.

The most obvious attribute of Micro LED seems to be its brightness – these modules positively glow. Samsung claims they'll offer the greatest peak HDR brightness of any screen, and we don't



doubt it. Even in the large hall used for the CES reveal, the brightness and colour vibrancy of the display models was outstanding. But while that will obviously be great for a conference room, quite how this translates to a home environment remains to be seen.

Narrowing gaps between the tech's microscopic LED chips has enabled Samsung to scale Micro LED down to 75in

LG rolls up OLED and debuts 8K

With its retracting screen, LG's OLED TV R looks less like a TV and more like a visual effect from a sci-fi movie. Taking advantage of OLED's inherent flexibility, the 65R9 (pictured right) rolls up or fully retracts into a smart designer cabinet.

We've seen this flexible characteristic before, on curved OLED screens, but here it looks less like a gimmick and more like the harbinger of a radical change in form factor. Although one missed trick is that the screen doesn't retract to create a 21:9



A new processor powers LG's OLED and LCD lines

widescreen viewing mode, which – to us – seems an obvious idea.

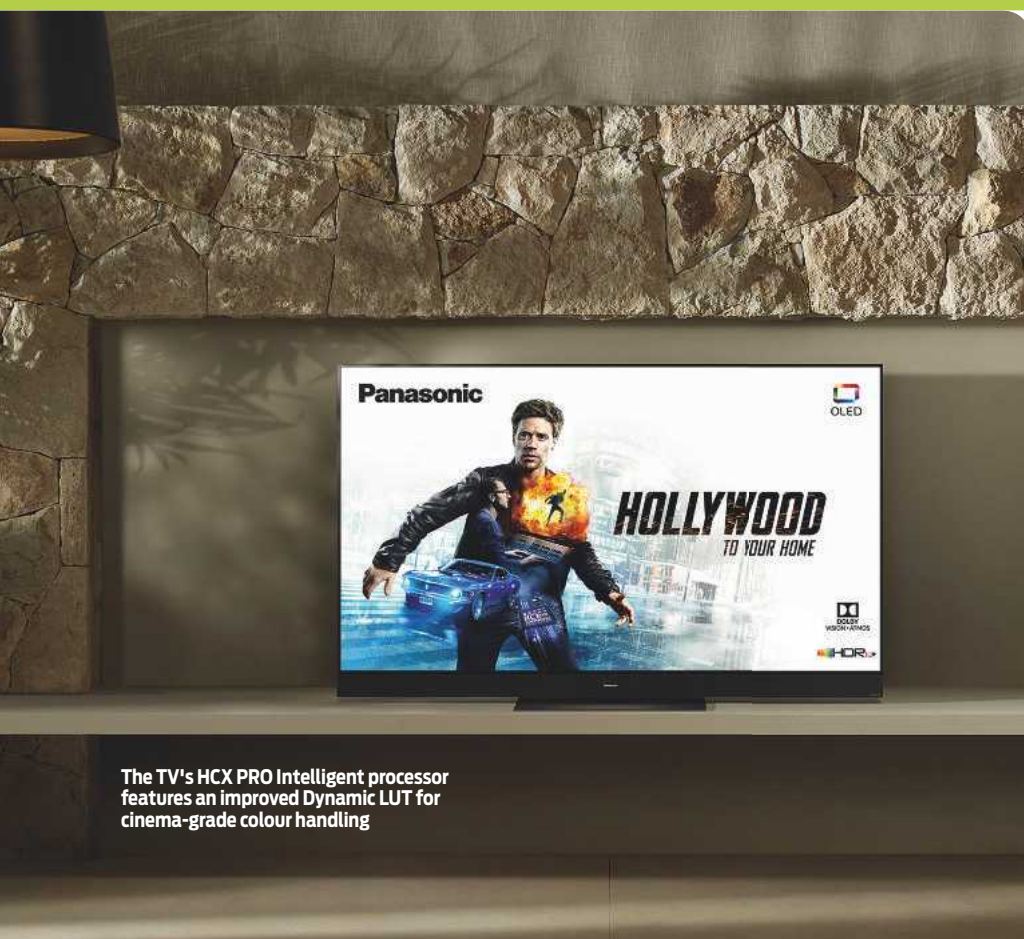
Away from this particular innovation, LG also refreshed its more traditional OLED and LCD product lines, most notably with the introduction of 8K resolution models.

Employing Alpha 9 Gen 2 processing are the Z9, W9, E9 and C9 OLEDs. Those with knowledge of LG's naming system will note the Z range is a new addition, and it's here where the company will debut its 8K OLED panel (with HDMI 2.1 connectivity) in an 88in guise. HDMI 2.1, which supports frame rates up to 120fps, eARC and variable refresh rates in addition to its headline 8K transmission, also features on LG's 2019 4K OLED TVs.

In the brand's NanoCell LCD TV range, 8K also appears on the 75in SM99 flagship.

When it comes to HDR support, LG continues to offer Dolby Vision on its premium sets, ignoring the HDR10+ standard co-launched by its Samsung rival.





The TV's HCX PRO Intelligent processor features an improved Dynamic LUT for cinema-grade colour handling

Panasonic opens arms to Dolby

The GZ2000 looks to be the OLED screen that AV fans have been clamouring for. The first true multi-HDR TV, it supports not only HDR and HDR10+, but also Dolby Vision and the new HLG Photo standard. It also has a Dolby Atmos sound system.

Interestingly, Panasonic hasn't just played lip-service to Atmos audio. The set actually features upfiring height speakers on the rear panel, to complement its soundbar, which has been beefed up with sister brand Technics' proprietary JENO Engine for greater sonic accuracy. The result is the first Atmos TV we've heard able to create an immersive listening experience. Dolby Vision content demos were also persuasive.

At the heart of the GZ2000 is a new intelligent iteration of the brand's HCX image processor, which has been tuned in collaboration with leading Hollywood colour grader Stefan Sonnenfeld. And the OLED panel itself claims rich heritage – dubbed a 'Professional Edition,' Panasonic says it has been exclusively customised by its R&D team, boosting average brightness level and contrast handling to deliver a greater dynamic range.

Yasushi Murayama, head of Panasonic's European TV business, declared the GZ2000, 'the most complete television we have ever made,' and we're not going to argue. It should land in the UK this Summer as 65in and 55in models.

More Masters from Sony

If you've been waiting for a Sony 8K megascreen, you're in luck. At CES the brand had two, specifically its new ZG9 Master Series, which will arrive in 85in and 98in screen sizes later this year. Both utilise a full array backlight with independently controlled LED modules, and – as with the original Sony Master Series – have a dedicated Netflix Calibrated mode, and support HDR10, HLG and Dolby Vision.

The ZG9 will also be one of the first European TVs to support IMAX Enhanced software (although details about what exactly this will entail on the hardware side are currently vague). Sony also confirmed that movies from Sony Pictures, including *Venom* and *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, will be available in IMAX Enhanced in Europe via the RakutenTV streaming in 2019.

Like its Master Series stablemates, the super-large ZG9 packs an X1 Ultimate picture processor, albeit bolstered with a unique algorithm especially developed for 8K content, thereby maximising detail and contrast. The same processor supports an 8K X-Reality PRO upscaler, with a database based on image data mined by Sony Pictures.

The set also introduces a new sound system, inspired by the Acoustic Surface innovation of Sony's OLED brigade. The newly coined Acoustic Multi-Audio utilises four front-facing speakers; two on the bottom and two on the top, which are designed to lock audio, specifically dialogue, to the picture area.

Joining this 8K model in the Master Series is a new 4K-resolution AG9 OLED (pictured right), which reverts to a super-slim form after the relative bulkiness of 2018's AF9.



'Larger screens are becoming more popular,' says Sony – but are you ready for 98in?

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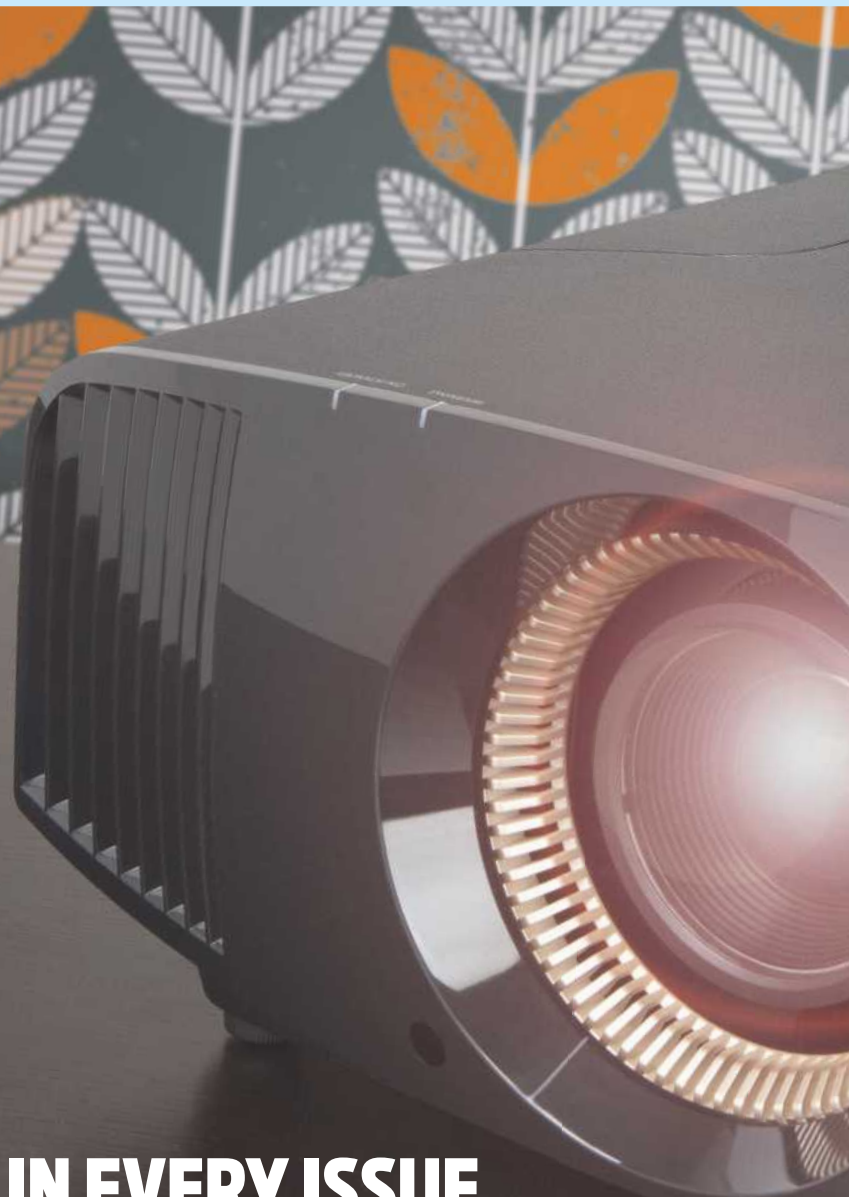
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25 big movies of 2019

Hollywood's love of sequels continues but you won't hear Team HCC complaining – returns to the *Star Wars*, *Avengers*, *Godzilla*, *Terminator* and *John Wick* franchises are all lined up for the next 12 months. Mark these movies and more in your calendar...

CAPTAIN MARVEL

Hinted at in the post-credits scene at the end of *Avengers: Infinity War*, Captain Marvel makes her debut in this solo outing – but don't expect any revelations about the future of Marvel's other superheroes after Thanos clicked his fingers, as a 1990s setting means this movie predates the existing MCU Phase 1/2/3 storylines.

Marvel's first female-led blockbuster stars Brie Larson as Carol Danvers/Captain Marvel, an amnesiac former US fighter pilot-turned-alien space commando, who returns to Earth looking for clues about her past, only to discover that extraterrestrial baddies have infiltrated the planet. Samuel L. Jackson provides continuity with the other MCU films (thanks to some nifty digital de-ageing FX) as a young Nick Fury.

Marvel has a track record of success when it comes to introducing lesser-known characters (*Iron Man*, *Ant-Man*) to the silver screen, so don't be surprised if Captain Marvel's debut lights up the box office, too.

In cinemas: March 8



The younger Nick Fury (below) still has both eyes in *Captain Marvel*. Will this be the film that reveals how he loses one?





TOY STORY 4

It's the series that Pixar can't seem to let go, but as the three preceding *Toy Story* outings (dating back to 1995) have all been superb, who will get sniffy about a fourth?

Tom Hanks and Tim Allen naturally reprise their roles of toys Woody and Buzz in a story co-written by original movie director and Pixar honcho John Lasseter, so hopefully we'll get the familiar blend of heart-warming narrative and set-piece excellence. Fingers crossed, too, that the film's release gives Disney impetus to re-issue the existing movies on Ultra HD Blu-ray.

In cinemas: June 21



THE LION KING

Hakuna Matata! The recent 4K outing for the 1994 animation whets the appetite for Disney's incoming *Lion King* remake. The studio and director Jon Favreau have form in this regard, having successfully reimaged *The Jungle Book* in 2016 as a live-action/CG mashup – here, though, there are no human characters, meaning it'll be up to the photo-realistic animation and voice cast (including Donald Glover as Simba, Seth Rogen as Pumbaa and James Earl Jones reprising his role of Mufasa) to sell the movie's Shakespearean story.

In cinemas: July 19

HELLBOY

As disappointing as it is that Guillermo del Toro will never get to complete his planned *Hellboy* trilogy, fans can take some measure of solace in the fact that 'Big Red' is returning to cinemas this Easter.

This time Neil Marshall steps behind the camera for an 'R-rated' franchise reboot that draws much more heavily 'design-wise and story-wise' on the original comics, according to *Hellboy* creator Mike Mignola. Meanwhile, *Stranger Things* actor David Harbour replaces Ron Perlman under the prosthetics and red body paint, and Ian McShane has been cast as Hellboy's adoptive father Trevor Bruttenholm.

Given Marshall's track record with the likes of *Dog Soldiers* and *The Descent*, it's no surprise that he describes his take on the character as 'more violent and bloody'. But as the trailer has shown, the film clearly boasts a devilishly fun sense of humour, too.

In cinemas: April 12



SPIDER-MAN: FAR FROM HOME

After a rather stressful run-in with Thanos elsewhere in the MCU, you can hardly blame Peter Parker (Tom Holland) from taking some time off and heading to Europe with his classmates in this sequel to 2017's enjoyable *Spider-Man: Homecoming*.

Sadly, what should be a relaxing summer holiday is turned upside down when Nick Fury (providing the obligatory MCU crossover cameo) enlists Spidey to help hunt down some international criminals. Aiding Spider-Man on his mission will be Jake Gyllenhaal's Quentin Beck – but as comic book fans know, Beck is better known as supervillain and 'master of illusion' Mysterio. As such, we don't expect their team-up to last...

In cinemas: July 5



ONCE UPON A TIME IN HOLLYWOOD

For his ninth writer/director outing, Quentin Tarantino continues to choose against playing

it safe. Who else would cook up a late-'60s Los Angeles neo-noir set against the backdrop of the infamous Manson Family murders?

Leonardo DiCaprio and Brad Pitt co-star as fictional duo Rick Dalton and Cliff Booth – the former a washed up TV Western actor, the latter his stunt double pal – while Margot Robbie (above) takes on the real-life role of Sharon Tate in a story that cinematographer Robert Richardson suggests is 'not easily describable.'

A big-budget period piece from QT? We're excited – even if he's gone back to shooting on 35mm.

In cinemas: July 26



COLD PURSUIT

Liam Neeson returns to multiplexes in head-knocking mode in this mid-budget action/thriller from Summit Entertainment with, it seems, a vein of black humour – although any movie about a Rocky Mountain snowplow driver doing battle with local drug dealers was surely always likely to be played slightly tongue-in-cheek, or risk being immediately consigned to the DTV dustbin.

Cold Pursuit is directed by relative unknown Hans Petter Moland, although it should be in safe hands, as he also helmed the 2014 Norwegian-language flick *In Order of Disappearance* that's been remade here with an American slant.

In recent years audiences have grown used to cheering on Neeson on winter nights – this ice-laden caper follows *The Commuter*, *Non-Stop*, *Taken 3* and *Run All Night* in getting a Jan/Feb release.

In cinemas: February 22



JOHN WICK: CHAPTER 3

John Wick: Chapter 2 managed the tricky feat of being a better movie than its predecessor, smartly expanding on the wider Wick world without losing any of the film's trademark bullet ballet and bone-cracking violence. It also set up this third instalment, with everyone's favourite dog-loving assassin banished from the Continental underworld with a global bounty on his head and a one-hour start.

As Wick, Keanu Reeves has found the perfect vehicle for his sombre acting style and martial arts

proWess. Director Chad Stahelski is under pressure to top the set-piece lunacy that fans have grown accustomed to. That's probably where the bike/horse chase (pictured) comes in...

Despite changing cinematographer from the first film to the second, the series has always showcased startling visuals, mixing jet-black details with innovative colour palettes. Immersive, dynamic soundmixes are another franchise fave. If you head out to see this, catch it at the best cinema possible.

In cinemas: May 17



X-MEN: DARK PHOENIX

First published in 1980, Chris Claremont and John Byrne's *Dark Phoenix Saga* remains one of the most beloved of all *X-Men* comic book storylines. So it's understandable, with 2014's *X-Men: Days of Future Past* having erased from the movie timeline the events of a previous, unsuccessful attempt at bringing the story to the bigscreen (*X-Men: The Last Stand*), that Fox would want to take the chance to go back and give it another go.

We'll have to wait to see whether the studio has done the story justice. However, the casting of Jessica Chastain as an alien shapeshifter who manipulates Jean Grey (Sophie Turner) at least teases the possibility of an attempt to recapture the intergalactic scale of the original comics, as opposed to the resolutely earthbound take from *X-Men: The Last Stand*.

In cinemas: June 7



AVENGERS: ENDGAME

With global ticket sales in excess of \$2bn, *Avengers: Infinity War* was the undisputed king of 2018. You can expect this follow-up to perform just as well thanks to audiences' desire to find out how 'Earth's mightiest heroes' can bounce back from the events of the previous film.

Understandably, Marvel Studios is playing its cards close to its chest, unwilling to reveal anything about the plot. However, the first teaser trailer has already revealed that Ant-Man and Hawkeye, both of whom sat out *Infinity War*, will be in *Avengers: Endgame* – the latter sporting a new, decidedly darker look seemingly based on the 'Ronin' identity he briefly adopted in the comics.

In cinemas: April 26



THE LEGO MOVIE 2: THE SECOND PART

2017's *The Lego Ninjago Movie* didn't quite reach the same heights of hilarity as its animated predecessors, but the series looks ready to bounce back in style this year. Original *Lego Movie* directors Phil Lord and Chris Miller are back on scripting duties and once again there's a lot more going on beneath the surface than you might expect, including an exploration of the differences in how boys and girls play, with invaders from the Sistar System (geddit?) attacking the citizens of Bricksburg. And we'll never tire of the franchise's faux stop-motion animation.

In cinemas: February 8



ARTEMIS FOWL

At first glance you'd be forgiven for thinking that *Artemis Fowl* is little more than a *Harry Potter* cash-in along the lines of the *Percy Jackson* films. And while Disney clearly has an eye on that lucrative *Potter* moolah, this adaptation of the first two books in author Eoin Colfer's fantasy saga piques our interest – not least for the fact that the story's titular (anti-)hero is a 12-year-old criminal mastermind whose reaction to discovering the existence of fairies is to kidnap one and try to ransom it off to restore his family fortune.

In cinemas: August 9



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IT: CHAPTER 2

Rather than trying to condense Stephen King's monster novel into a single movie, Warner Bros. chose to focus *IT* (2017) on the childhood, erm, adventures of the Loser's Club – leaving their adult battles with the titular entity/Pennywise the killer clown for this follow-up. Of course, this requires a new cast – James McAvoy (as Ben) and Jessica Chastain (as Beverly) take top billing.

The first film was perhaps the most successful King adaptation since 2007's *The Mist*; we're interested to see how returning director Andy Muschietti handles the more surreal elements of King's story climax.

In cinemas: September 6



THE NEW MUTANTS

...*Dark Phoenix* (p24) is the year's most high-profile *X-Men* movie, but *The New Mutants* is by far the most intriguing. Originally set for release last April, this horror-themed *X-Men* spin-off was delayed for over a year to allow for significant reshoots designed to ramp up the scare factor. Described by Fox CEO Stacey Snider as 'a haunted house movie with a bunch of hormonal teenagers,' the film follows five young mutants being held against their will in a secret facility, who must adjust to their new abilities while fighting to escape a supernatural menace.

In cinemas: August 2

FAST & FURIOUS PRESENTS: HOBBS AND SHAW

The burgeoning bromance between Dwayne Johnson's federal agent Luke Hobbs and Jason Statham's rogue soldier Deckard Shaw was one of the highlights of *Fast & Furious 8*, paving the way for this hotly anticipated spin-off outing teaming up two of the leading lights of action cinema. Adding more appeal is the presence of David Leitch (*John Wick*, *Deadpool 2*, *Atomic Blonde*) as director.

Plot-wise, ...*Hobbs and Shaw* is being kept under wraps (a first trailer is still awaited), but its stars have suggested it will adopt a more based-in-reality approach than the increasingly outlandish *F&F* series, while mining the characters' relationship for old-school buddy movie laughs. And no doubt there'll be plenty of kicking, punching and explosions along the way.

In cinemas: July 26



THE KID WHO WOULD BE KING

This British fantasy film stars Louis Ashbourne Serkis (son of mo-cap maestro Andy Serkis) as Alex Elliot, a 12-year-old schoolboy who stumbles across King Arthur's legendary Excalibur and learns he is destined to form a new Round Table and battle the ancient sorceress Morgana and her army of monsters.

Tag-lines like 'Evil gets schooled' suggest this has family audiences in it sights, but writer/director Joe Cornish was also responsible for the superb hoodies-versus-aliens sci-fi flick *Attack the Block*, so don't be surprised if *The Kid Who Would Be King* plays well with adults, too. Although Cornish has worked on the scripts for Spielberg's *The Adventures of Tintin: Secret of the Unicorn* and Marvel's *Ant-Man* since *Attack...* this marks his first return behind the camera.

In cinemas: February 15

UNTITLED TERMINATOR SEQUEL

Time travel is a wonderful thing, and for James Cameron it lets him conveniently ignore the three *Terminator* movies made since his *T2: Judgment Day* juggernaut and put together a new man vs machine sci-fi with original stars Linda Hamilton (pictured below, right) and Arnold Schwarzenegger. For those who found *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*, *Terminator Salvation* and *Terminator Genisys* a chore, the lure here is of a fresh start.

Cameron, now back in control of the US rights (not worldwide) to the *Terminator* franchise isn't directing as he's too busy with *Avatar* sequels. Yet he does serve as producer and has penned the story, which will be a direct follow on from *T2: Judgment Day*, with – apparently – a mid-'90s setting. Tim Miller is behind the camera, last seen creating cinematic havoc with *Deadpool*.

In cinemas: October 31



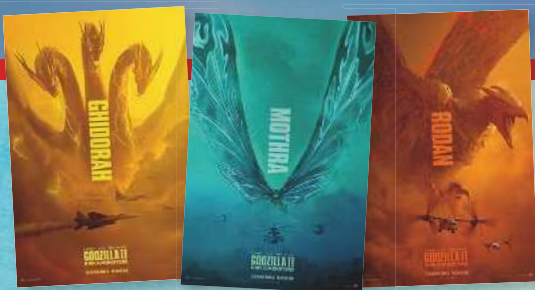
JOKER

Despite repeatedly scoring the studio multi-million dollar hits, Warner's DC Extended Universe has been slated by some for not being as fun, family-friendly or financially successful as its Marvel rival. We doubt *Joker* will change that pervasive view, but the flick should give Warner a break from being labelled a mere copycat.

Joaquin Phoenix takes the title role in what is being billed as a low-budget (\$60m) character study/origin story, loosely based on Alan Moore's award-winning graphic novel *Batman: The Killing Joke*. Martin Scorsese produces, roping in frequent collaborator Robert De Niro in a supporting role.

Look out for a shortfall in quips, gadgets and SFX set-pieces, with Phoenix taking on the film's heavy lifting in a part that might finally earn him a Best Actor Oscar after two previous nominations.

In cinemas: October 4



GODZILLA: KING OF MONSTERS

Legendary Pictures' 'MonsterVerse' has a stupid name, but its initial two outings – 2014's *Godzilla* and 2017's *Kong: Skull Island* have been total triumphs and home cinema demo delights.

For this third entry the big lizard is back doing battle with Rodan, Mothra and King Ghidorah – kaiju characters previously introduced in Toho studios' Japanese *Godzilla* franchise, and teased at the end of *Kong: Skull Island*. Events in this mega-budget clash-of-the-titans presumably partly set up next year's *Godzilla vs Kong*.

Director Michael Dougherty makes the shift from low-budget fantasy fare like *Krampus* and *Trick 'r Treat* to overseeing a \$200m spend. Here's hoping he can nail the visual aesthetic and immersive audio excellence that have been the MonsterVerse's calling card so far.

Catch it in Dolby Cinema or IMAX. Or both.
In cinemas: May 31

Karate-trained stuntman T.J. Storm once again gives Godzilla his mo-capped moves



On the box

Binge watch these big-budget TV series in 2019

Game of Thrones



Sky Atlantic

The eighth and final season of HBO's zeitgeist-defining fantasy airs from April, promising six more episodes of bloody murder, battle and dragons.

The Umbrella Academy



Netflix

Streaming from mid-February, Netflix's Dark Horse Comics adaptation features a 'family' of superpowered children raised by a billionaire entrepreneur.

Good Omens



Amazon Prime Video/BBC Two

A TV version of Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett's wickedly funny apocalypse novel will finally arrive this year, first on Amazon Prime and then on terrestrial telly.

Watchmen

Sky Atlantic (TBC)

We're assuming that Sky's relationship with show-maker HBO will see this much-anticipated graphic novel series get a UK airing.

Stranger Things

Netflix

Kick back with more 1980s-set pop culture-tastic horror/fantasy when the third season of Netflix's superb original series streams on July 4 (US Independence Day).



MEN IN BLACK: INTERNATIONAL

A fourth movie was on the cards as soon as 2012's *Men in Black 3* reacquainted audiences with the slapstick sci-fi adventures of Agents J (Will Smith) and K (Tommy Lee Jones), and scored Sony Pictures a sizable hit. Yet what we've ended up with takes the series in a new direction, with those leads replaced by a new cast (although Emma Thompson provides some continuity as MIB head Agent O), and the action moving to this side of the pond.

If the prospect of yet another two hours of crazy alien FX, zippy dialogue and oddball plotting doesn't entice, consider that this instalment is directed by F. Gary Gray, who previously bought his talents to *Straight Outta Compton* and *Fast & Furious 8*.

In cinemas: June 14



ROCKETMAN

Music biopics are suddenly big business, following the (surprise?) global success of Freddie Mercury/Queen dramatisation *Bohemian Rhapsody*. Next up is *Rocketman*, which aims to do the same with rock'n'roll superstar Elton John, and even counts Dexter Fletcher as director, who also partially helmed the Mercury biopic. Taron Egerton takes on the role of the piano-bashing music maestro – a part that was once actually earmarked for Tom Hardy (which would have been interesting...).

So what to expect from *Rocketman*? Lavish attention to period detail, an unflinching look at John's drug/drink-fuelled period, and thousands of costume changes. And, most important of all, the music. If the film can capture the energy of his live performances, it'll probably take off at the box office.

In cinemas: May 24



BRIGHTBURN

James 'Guardians of the Galaxy' Gunn produces this sci-fi-horror that turns Superman's origin story on its head. As in that tale, a farming couple in smalltown America adopt a baby who crashes to Earth from outer space. The twist, however, is that not only does the child develop super powers as he ages, he also turns out to be a nasty piece of work. From the look of the trailer that surfaced late last year it would appear the filmmakers are leaning wholeheartedly into the 'evil Clark Kent' thing, right down to beat-for-beat recreations of familiar imagery from DC's *Man of Steel*.

In cinemas: May 24



STAR WARS: EPISODE XI

Those who loved *...The Last Jedi* will flock to *Star Wars: Episode IX* to see how Rey, Finn and Kylo Ren's story unfolds. Those who hated *...The Last Jedi* will also make a beeline to discover if J.J. Abrams can turn the series around. Either way, Disney is on to a winner.

The film's plot is shrouded in secrecy. Rumours (around the eventual title, whether Mark Hamill/Luke Skywalker will return...) abound. No doubt the first trailer will raise more questions than answers when it launches.

This trilogy-closing blockbuster will take over premium large format cinemas for weeks, so maybe pre-book your ticket. We're also thrilled to see *Star Wars* return to a pre-Christmas release date, after Disney's fateful decision to move *Solo: A Star Wars Story* to a Spring/Summer slot.

In cinemas: December 19



SHAZAM!

If the upcoming *Joker* origin movie (see p26) has you wondering 'Why so serious?' then *Shazam!* is the film that proves DC hasn't lost its sense of humour. With a setup that feels akin to a superhero version of *Big*, the film stars Asher Angel as 14-year-old orphan Billy Batson, who encounters an ancient wizard (Djimon Hounsou) and is given the ability to transform into a super-powered adult body (played by Zachary Levi) whenever he utters the magic word 'Shazam!'

Judging from footage released so far, we can expect plenty of hijinks as teenage Billy adjusts to his newfound powers (and the body that comes with them). But lest you worry that *Shazam!* will be nonstop super-silliness, Mark Strong is on hand to bring genuine menace to the movie as twisted industrialist Dr. Thaddeus Sivana ■

In cinemas: April 5



DUMBO

Before its *Lion King* remake hits cinemas (see p23) Walt Disney has another update of an animated classic ready to roll. Tim Burton helms this 'live-action' take on the flying elephant story, while Colin Farrell, Michael Keaton, Danny DeVito and Eva Green add some star power in front of the camera. No doubt Disney is hoping that Burton can work the same sort of box office magic on *Dumbo* as he did on the studio's 2010 live-action remake of *Alice in Wonderland*; if not, audiences should at least have a particularly freaky 'pink elephants on parade' sequence to look forward to.

In cinemas: March 29

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IMAX ENHANCED TOUCHES DOWN...

Armed with an Arcam AV860 processor and battery of 4K Blu-ray players, **Jon Thompson** sets sail on a next-gen AV journey

IMAX ENHANCED ISN'T a new disc format – it's more of an extension to Ultra HD Blu-ray, as to be a full new 'format' it would have to be included as mandatory on all players and be ratified by the Blu-ray Disc Association. But it will still get some die-hard AV enthusiasts excited, and has certainly impressed me.

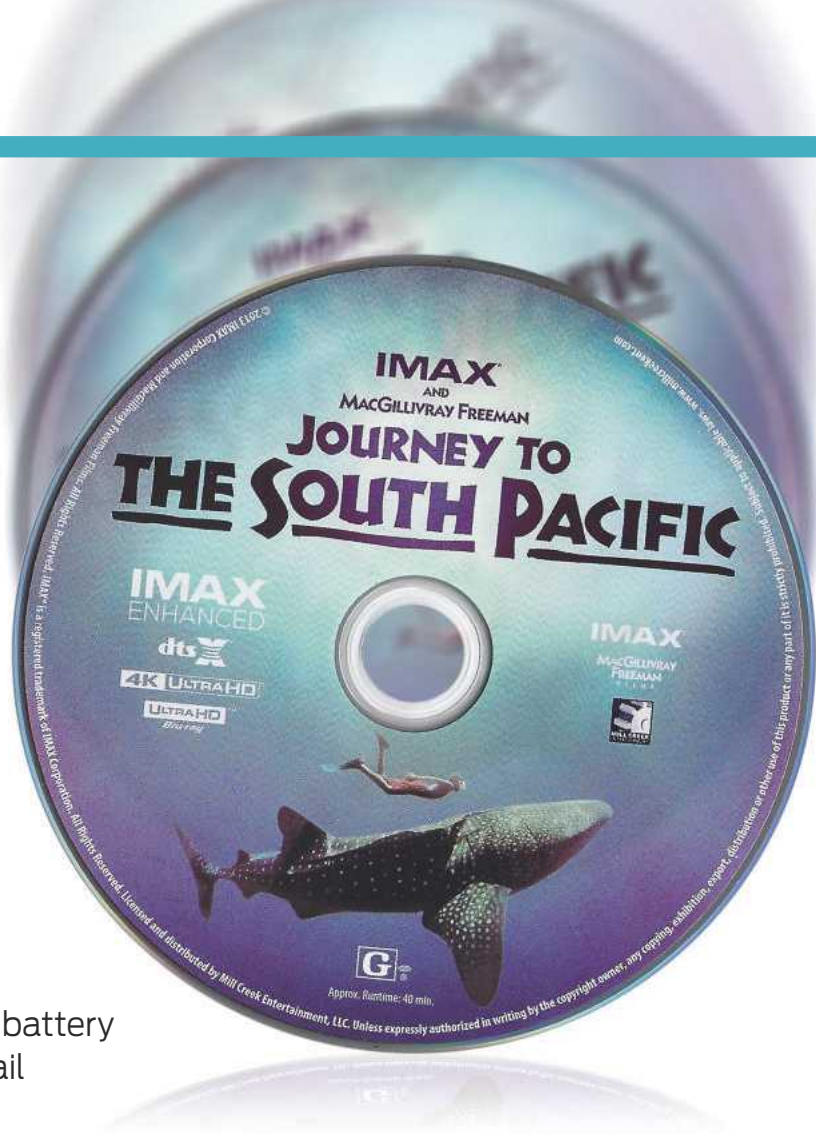
IMAX Enhanced is a set of features that go from content to screen, starting with a specially encoded Ultra HD Blu-ray disc, to a TV or projector with an IMAX Enhanced mode, as well as an audio processor with an IMAX audio mode.

IMAX and DTS, which have co-launched IMAX Enhanced, say the goal of the format is to 'introduce IMAX digitally re-mastered content for the home environment to provide the sharpest 4K HDR images and powerful, immersive sound as the filmmaker intended.'

This bullish announcement came last autumn – with no actual content or hardware. That situation, thankfully, changed late last year.

Armed with an Arcam AV860 processor, which has recently been firmware updated to support IMAX Enhanced, I sat down to sample *Journey to the South Pacific*, one of the first disc releases (another, *A Beautiful Planet*, launched on the same day in the US). *Journey to the South Pacific* is a documentary film that has only ever been shown in the largest IMAX theatres, and promises to be a *tour de force* of image quality.

What's also noteworthy about IMAX Enhanced is that this disc was the first available using the



***Journey to the South Pacific* is a 40-minute natural history documentary shot on IMAX cameras – and it looks lush**

dynamic metadata HDR10+ HDR standard, a souped-up variant of its industry standard cousin HDR10. The latter works and is fine, but an issue has been that some 4K HDR TVs have struggled to accurately tone map HDR10 content (this is when the display cannot achieve the peak brightness of the image, so has to mathematically rework content to a lower brightness while retaining the visual dynamics). HDR10+ feeds the display in real time with image brightness information on a scene by scene basis, in a very similar way to Dolby Vision, and aims to eradicate tone mapping artefacts.

It has been suggested to me that all 4K discs in the future will be HDR10+, as it meets the mandatory requirements of HDR10 and provides the enhanced screen brightness info for a TV/projector to recalibrate scene by scene. This would certainly be a good thing, but with only 20th Century Fox and Warner Bros currently onboard in addition to IMAX, and other discs dribbling out (*Bad Times at the El Royale*, launched Stateside in early January by Fox, is the first movie title), such a future looks a long way off.

Work in progress

My first impression of HDR10+ is that in some Ultra HD Blu-ray players it doesn't (yet) work. And I don't mean that the players couldn't read the HDR10+ encode: they weren't able to handle its HDR10 core. I tried a Sony UBP-X800, Oppo UDP-203 and Panasonic DMP-UB900, all with the latest firmware. All saw *Journey to the*

South Pacific as SDR and with a REC.709 colour space, not the BT.2020 HDR it is on the disc. Hmmmm.

I got the Oppo to work with it by forcing its HDR10 detection, at which point it sent out the HDR10 stream. Since my testing, Oppo has released a new firmware update for its UDP-203 and UDP-205 machines making them HDR10+ compliant. These decks now join Panasonic's DP-UB9000, DP-UB420 and DP-UB820 in supporting it, and will be followed by Pioneer's UDP-LX500 and LX800 in 2019.

The disc played out in HDR10 (but not HDR10+) from a Samsung UBD-M9500, and – as advertised – in HDR10+ via a Panasonic UB9000.

The other side of the IMAX Enhanced coin is the DTS:X IMAX sound profile. *The Journey to the South Pacific* disc has such a track and all my players except the Panasonic UB9000 and Oppo UDP-203/205 failed to play it in this format. Again, firmware updates should solve this.

Going on a journey

Number crunchers will be delighted to know that the *Journey to the South Pacific* IMAX Enhanced disc peaks at 110Mbps, which likely makes it the highest bitrate-encoded disc to date. Now, throwing this many bits at a weak picture would be pointless, but that's not the case here – this natural history documentary, directed by Greg MacGillivray and shot on 65mm IMAX 3D cameras, is an amazing 4K showcase. It's easy to see why this title was chosen to debut IMAX Enhanced, as it demonstrates how much potential there is in 4K.

I viewed it on a Sony ZD9 LCD, Panasonic FZ952 OLED TV and Barco 4K DLP digital cinema projector. The image looks almost photorealistic and is the first time I have seen a home format approach anything like what we see in the post-production world. Nothing appears enhanced or pushed; the colour grade is like a Kodak moment throughout. Just get this disc for the images alone.

Another facet of IMAX Enhanced is its use of full frame. This term means anything that fills the full height and width of the container, in this case 16:9 or 1.77:1. IMAX is reliving a battle from the 1950s, which was VistaVision vs CinemaScope. VistaVision had the tag line 'We have the height', an argument that IMAX is using, playing to people who don't like black bars on their tellies.

IMAX Digital is 1.9:1, very close to 1.77:1 compared to the 2.40:1 ratio that most filmmakers opt for. This explains why IMAX has chosen Sony 4K projectors as a partner, as these models have a 4,096 by 2,160 chip that is 1.9:1 ratio, and would match IMAX Digital content pixel for pixel. But this is something I'm yet to experience as the IMAX Enhanced projector updates haven't surfaced.

So what difference did HDR10+ make? In some scenes, shadows were better defined and the overall picture had a more consistent contrast punch. What the dynamic metadata delivery is doing is subtle, but undoubtedly a step in the right direction. HDR10+ arguably should have been the standard from launch.

Sound-wise, the *Journey to the South Pacific* platter also impresses. It has that natural history film sound, a bit in-your-face, as most if not all these



Arcam's IMAX Enhanced firmware was released late 2018

films are captured mute with audio post-produced. This helps to show off some of the IMAX Enhanced sonic features, one of which is a bass roll-off to try and replicate IMAX cinema sound, where full-range speakers with no subwoofer channel are employed. It's very effective, and a clever use of the DTS:X metadata to steer the DSP. So while sonically the disc is a bit over the top, as an example of what the system can do it's perfect.

How about Dunkirk next?

Obviously, what we want to see now is how a studio film translates to IMAX Enhanced. *Journey to the South Pacific* is only 40 minutes long, which means it's hardly touching the sides of the platter. Most feature films are around two hours in length and would need a BD100 disc to have anywhere near the same bitrate offered here.

My reaction to the first IMAX Enhanced disc is overall very positive. The only bespoke part I could test was the soundmix, as there are no displays available yet that are IMAX Enhanced image-wise, but it does unleash HDR10+ into the wild. Is it just another THX? On this early evidence, it might be better thought of as Ultra HD Blu-ray Plus... ■



Our up-to-date processor flagged it was receiving IMAX audio

Where to get IMAX Enhanced?

There's a small (and premium) range of hardware being assembled

AVRs/processors

Sound United (parent corp of Denon and Marantz) and Arcam are the first audio specialists to commit to IMAX Enhanced. Firmware for Arcam's hardware arrived late 2018, introducing support to its AVR390, AVR550 and AVR850 receivers, and AV860 AV processor. Updates for Denon's AVR-X6500H and AVR-X4500H (pictured), and Marantz's AV7705 and AV8805 processors, are expected February.



TVs/projectors

The only display partner so far announced for IMAX Enhanced is Sony – at the US CEDIA expo in September it promised IMAX Enhanced Mode updates for its 4K projector range, and has said 2018 and 2019 premium TVs will also come online.

UHD players

IMAX Enhanced discs use HDR10+, meaning playing choices are currently limited to hardware from Panasonic, Oppo and Pioneer. Samsung has previously suggested its own decks would be upgraded to HDR10+ capability, but the firmware is still awaited.

Living room luxury

The aim of this install was high-quality movie and music entertainment without the typical 'batcave' feel. **Mark Craven** bins his cape



KIT CHECKLIST

M&K SOUND: 3 x IW300 (LCR); 2 x X10 subwoofers; 2 x IW150 (surround); 4 x IW950 (in-ceiling)
LYNGDORF: MP-50 16-channel surround sound processor (Dolby Atmos, DTS:X and Auro-3D)
TAG MCLAREN: 2 x 100x5R five-channel power amps
LG: 55EC930V OLED TV
LUMAGEN: Mini-3D video processor
OPPO: BDP-103EU Blu-ray player
SKY: Sky+ HD
AMAZON: Fire TV 4K
PHILIPS: Pronto TSU9600 control system
AC INFINITY: 2 x Aircom T8 cooling systems
ISOTEK: Orion GII power conditioner
LUTRON: Lighting control
CHORD: Sarum & Signature Tuned Array cables



NOT ALL BESPOKE projects are largescale rooms, but nor do more compact media dens have to skimp on AV quality. This installation from UK company SeriouslyCinema took an everyday lounge and added a high-performance movie and music system that's nearly invisible.

Opting for a 5.2.4 configuration, M&K Sound in-wall and in-ceiling models were chosen to provide audio thrills. 'The owner had spent a decade working in broadcast studios and already owned a high-end system from the early noughties, so had a critical ear and knew the sound they wanted to achieve,' explains Richard Magnus, SeriouslyCinema's MD. 'Hearing the M&K Sound speakers at our demonstration facility proved them as a perfect match.'

Speakers chosen, various processors were auditioned, with demo units installed in the room before its makeover so the audiophile owner could evaluate in a known environment. A Lyngdorf MP-50 was eventually selected to provide the system's back-end brains, bringing Atmos, DTS:X and Auro-3D decoding, plus RoomPerfect room calibration.

Fake views

A key demand for the install was a discreet feel so considerable prep work was necessary for the 5m x 4m room, including blocking up a window, adding >

A. Hey Pronto

The house already had a Philips Pronto control system in place (linked to a music server for whole home audio) so this was integrated into the new AV setup

B. That ain't no fire

A new false chimney breast, fitted atop the room's bare brick wall, was designed to house the front left/right in-wall speakers and 55in TV...

C. Cabinet meeting

...while installed underneath is a custom-made cabinet – with its own dedicated mains supply – hiding twin 19in AV racks, the room's centre speaker, and pair of subwoofers. It's topped off with a quartz stone panel for a style touch and to beef up rigidity



two 'fake' side-wall pillars to accommodate the surround speakers, and constructing a false chimney breast (a log fire stands adjacent to it) to house system electronics, twin subwoofers, LCR speakers and provide mounting space for the LG OLED TV. The custom cabinet features a granite floor to reduce vibrations, while extractor fans keep the AV hardware cool.

For lighting and system control, the installer was able to integrate new electronics with an existing Lutron/Philips multiroom setup used for the owner's old lounge and family media room. ('Yes, this house has two cinema rooms,' says Magnus). A music server delivers audio throughout the house.

While the kit rack currently features a 1080p Oppo BD deck and the TV is a Full HD model, the system is wired for 4K and an upgrade would be easily achieved. An ISF calibrated Lumagen video processor sits in the signal path to fine-tune images.

'The intimacy and detail of the audio is amazing,' states the happy owner of the finished room. 'I have never heard music and movies sound so good. Dedicated time to listening and planning has paid off – and the fact you don't see any of the speakers is even more impressive.' ■



D. Top-range in-wall

M&K Sound's IW300 speakers are the brand's range-topping in-wall option. Each features dual 6.5in midbass drivers and a trio of 1in soft dome fabric tweeters. A 12cm mounting depth is required

E. Four more please

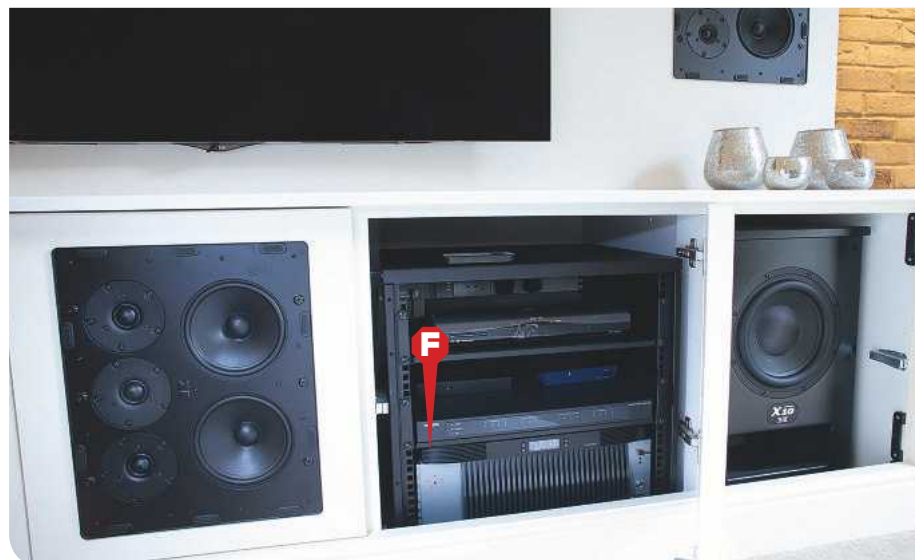
M&K Sound models (fitted with custom fire-hoods) were again used for the four-channel in-ceiling layer

F. Format friendly

Audio calibration was achieved via the Lyngdorf MP-50 processor's RoomPerfect tool. Billed by its manufacturer as delivering 'the ultimate experience', the MP-50 handles Atmos, DTS:X and Auro-3D, passes 4K HDR content and offers 16-channel XLR outputs

G. OLED legend

LG's curved 55in 930V was its second-generation OLED, marking the moment the self-emissive tech went from niche option to AV must-have. In this system it links to Sky, Blu-ray and VOD sources



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SONA steps out in style

Daniel Sait admires the colour scheme, symmetry and room-shaking audio system of this basement home cinema conversion



KIT CHECKLIST

OPPO: BDP-105D Blu-ray player

KALEIDESCAPE: Strato 4K HDR media player

ANTHEM: AVM60 11.2-channel AV processor; 2 x MCA325 three-channel power amplifiers; 1 x MCA525 five-channel power amplifier

ARTCOUSTIC: 3 x Spitfire SL 16-8; 4 x SL 40-30/4-2; 4 x C1 SL; 2 x Spitfire Control 3 subwoofers (plus amps)

SONY: VPL-VW520ES 4K HDR projector

SCREEN RESEARCH: 140in-wide 2.40:1 side-masking projector screen

PANAMORPH: Anamorphic lens

APPLE: iPad Mini 4

RTI: Control system



UK INSTALLER SONA delivered this impressive Dolby Atmos basement cinema as part of a whole house project in a converted vicarage. The system was shortlisted as a finalist in the 'Best Home Cinema' category of the CEDIA Awards 2018.

SONA was asked to reimagine an empty bare-brick basement as a dedicated cinema space. A 7.2.4-channel audio setup was specified, using Artcoustic speakers and Anthem processing and power (totalling 4,000W on tap). All speakers are in optimum positions according to industry standards – some are hidden by acoustically transparent posters (produced by Artcoustic's digital printing service) to deliver a movie-based aesthetic but keep the desired sound quality.

Visuals are provided by a 4K Sony projector with a Panamorph anamorphic lens system, with material coming via a Kaleidescape player, Oppo BD deck and Sky Q. A custom-made interface on an iPad offers one-touch source selection.

For the overall design, a panelled concept was created to deliver symmetry, replicated by the plush eight-person seating layout ■

A. And there's more

The cinema is part of a whole house project that won 'Best Integrated Home £230,000-£340,000' at the 2018 CEDIA Awards

B. Audio art

Acoustically transparent film posters let you know this is a room with movie entertainment in mind – and conceal the surround speakers



C. Light it up

The illuminated, coffered ceiling features acoustic stretched material, allowing the room's quartet of in-ceiling Atmos models to remain invisible

D. Ready to go wide

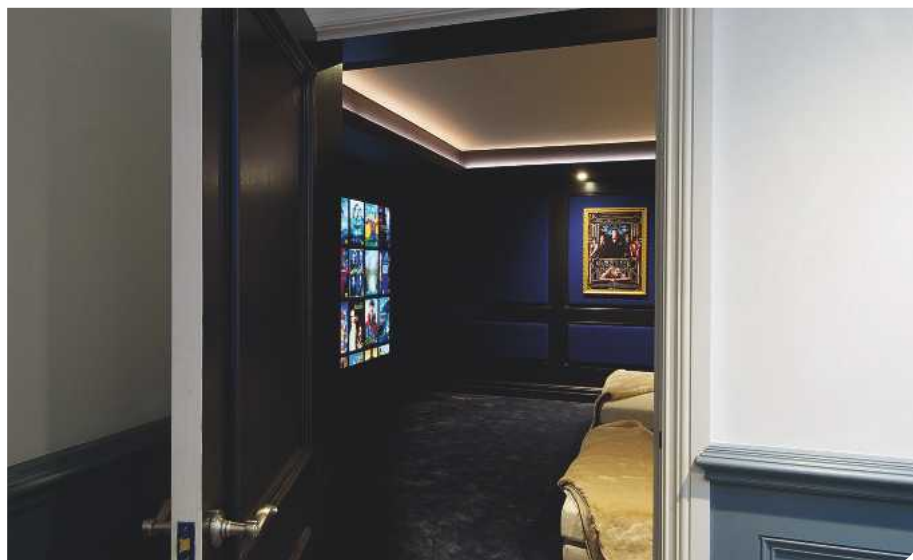
A Panamorph anamorphic lens system delivers automated constant height projection of 2.35:1 material from the rear-mounted Sony 4K PJ

E. Flick of the switch

The cinema's wall-mounted lighting control panel offers 'TV', 'Movie' and 'All On' keys, plus one that says 'Wine'...

F. The brains of the operation

A triple Middle Atlantic rack system governs the movie room and AV throughout the house – components include the Kaleidescape Strato player, Anthem and Artcoustic amps, plus Sky Q and Sonos hardware



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REVIEWS

→ **HARDWARE** SONY VPL-VW570ES 4K HDR projector and 65in ZF9 4K LCD TV
 PANASONIC Mid-range Ultra HD Blu-ray player **WHARFEDALE** Affordable Vista soundbar
 BOWERS & WILKINS 600 Series standmount 5.1 package **AMAZON** Fire TV Stick 4K streamer
 OPTOMA 4K DLP projector **GROUPTEST** Four 55in 4K TVs go head-to-head

The heart of your system



Dolby Atmos/DTS:X playback, wireless media streaming and HEOS/Apple multiroom make Marantz's seven-channel NR1609 an impressive system hub – while the slim form factor earns it more brownie points. See p46.

HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

All prices quoted are approximate and may have changed

Sony's step-up VPL-VW570ES projector takes home cinema seriously, says **Steve May**

A life in the theatre

How much would you pay for a dollop more brightness and better contrast? In the world of high-end projection, Sony reckons the step up is worth three grand. In truth, if you have to mull it over, it's probably not worth the price premium. But if you don't, you're in for a treat.

The VPL-VW570ES, you see, sits in that potentially precarious home cinema space above the brand's entry-level (okay, it sells for £5,000) VPL-VW270ES. The assumption is that AV fans will be prepared to spend considerably more for a modest increase in performance. After all, the surcharge is but a drop in the ocean compared to the £25,000 laser-light VPL-VW870ES, Sony's domestic flagship.

The price hike over the VPL-VW570ES's cheaper stablemate is warranted by the inclusion of a dynamic iris, and a boost in absolute brightness, which given this 4K model's HDR talents, could be significant.

Get your motors running

One thing's for sure, setting up the VPL-VW570ES is a dream. As befits a premium projector, focus, zoom and generous lens shift are all motorised, and set via remote control. There's no fiddling with wheels here, and the projector adjusts with total precision, making it a doddle to position and sharpen the image. A comprehensive Picture Position Memory tool can be used in conjunction with advanced screen installation masking for various film formats, from TV-friendly 16:9 to 21:9 CinemaScope. The projector can store lens, zoom and shift settings for up to five screen ratios.

It's a well-built AV hunk, too. Almost half-a-metre wide, with curvy matt casework (available in grey or white finish) and bronze-effect lens collar that look the business. Either side of the lens, vents cool and expel warm air. Overall weight is a hefty 14kg.

Side-mounted connections are two HDMI inputs (supporting 18Gbps 4K HDR transmission up to 60fps), plus USB, RS-232C, IR minijack, twin 12V triggers and Ethernet. The latter allows pro-installers to set up the projector using a web-based interface, and employ control and monitoring with AMX, Crestron, RoomView and Control4 protocols.

The projector is supplied with a large backlit remote control. The key controls are also duplicated on the unit itself, allowing you to navigate settings without recourse to the zapper.



As is the norm for Sony, this model uses native 4K SXR (Silicon X-tal Reflective Display) technology beneath the hood. This offers up to 4,096 x 2,160 resolution (that of the Digital Cinema System specification), although us regular folk will only need the 3,840 x 2,160 used by Ultra HD Blu-ray, streaming platforms, *et al.*

The VPL-VW570ES is designed for medium and large theatres. To cast a 100in image, you'll need a throw distance of between 3.05m and 6.28m. For a 120in screen, the minimum projection distance is 3.67m.

Going native

Installed, and aligned, this mid-tier Sony immediately impresses. After a slew of pixel-shifting 4K projectors, it's something of a revelation to sit down in front of a native 4K beamer and be reminded just how astonishingly crisp UHD can be. Live sport is an obvious winner in this regard, with stunning levels of detail on offer.

The PJ's light output is rated at 1,800 Lumens, a reasonable increase over the 1,500 of the VPL-VW270ES [see HCC #293], with a dynamic contrast claim of 350,000:1. The employment of a dynamic iris enhances >

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
4K HDR SXR home theatre projector

POSITION:
Mid-point in Sony's range, between the VPL-VW270ES and VPL-VW870ES

PEERS:
JVC DLA-N7; Epson EH-TW9400

1. While zoom/focus are motorized, the lens cover is an old-school pop-off affair

2. The remote offers one-button control over the PJ's advanced iris tool



2



the projector's contrast capability, adjusting brightness depending on content.

£8,000 is a lot to pay, but when the lights dim the Sony's pictures will reward your investment. *Pacific Rim: Uprising* (Ultra HD Blu-ray) provides plenty of scope for the VPL-VW570ES to shine.

The early, chaotic appearance of Amara Namani's single-pilot Jaeger, Scrapper, is a jaw-dropper. During the pursuit by the Pan-Pacific Defence Corps, this little mech smashes through various buildings to escape, resulting in a tsunami of fine 4K detail on screen, and the PJ's almost luminous portrayal of colour, from the cockpit HUD to the clanking metal Jaegers themselves, is intoxicatingly dramatic.

Contrast and black level performance is beguiling. SXRD has always been extremely good at delivering convincing blacks, even without the aid of a dynamic

'The VW570ES unleashes a tsunami of fine 4K detail on screen, plus almost luminous portrayals of colour'

iris, but here the onscreen action is given extra snap. Thankfully, the iris is well behaved. There's no perception that it's hunting, with the fluctuations in black level that might involve. The image is solid and stable.

HDR management (the VPL-VW570ES is compatible with standard HDR10 and broadcast HLG) is also surprisingly good, with an ability to manage bright highlights, and tone map without falling prey to over-darkened images or highlight wash-outs, that's a cut above more affordable rivals.

In *Pacific Rim: Uprising*, when Scrapper makes its final run for it along the beach, the frame is a riot of well-balanced colour detail and sparkle. Here, the Sony is able to depict vibrant blue skies alongside white cloud detail. Highlights never seem exaggerated.

While most users will leave the VPL-VW570ES on Auto, there's a specific HDR Reference mode available for content mastered with a peak of 1,000 nits. This should be used for all HDR TV sport.



Sony's Reality Creation image enhancement is, in my opinion, always best left on. It never looks artificial, and continually adds bonus clarity to images. Using ingenious pattern-matching algorithms, developed from the years of data accumulated by Sony's studio division, it manages the almost remarkable feat of enhancing detail without introducing artefacts or misinterpreting noise. There's a luscious patina and texture to the metal of that Scrapper Jaeger, and the VPL-VW570ES showcases every element of nuance and texture. Reality Creation also effectively embellishes HD material, be it from BD or set-top box.

It's not just resolution authenticity that sets the VPL-VW570ES apart from the rush of lower-cost single-chip 4K DLP models. It also offers superior WCG (wide colour gamut) coverage when it comes to colour reproduction. Ultra HD Blu-rays naturally benefit, and the hard to resist oversaturation also translates to delicious eye-candy with regular HD content. *Batman Ninja* (Netflix HD, upscaled to 2160p) appears absurdly vibrant, yet is never garish. While the Dark Knight is all the correct shades of grey, the primaries in the Joker's castle sear from the screen, and there's no overt banding either.

King of the jungle

Mowgli: Legend of the Jungle (4K HDR, Netflix) provides a stern test of the Sony's black level performance. The coat of black panther Bagheera combines low-level black detailing alongside bright, shiny highlights. The VPL-VW570ES resists sacrificing one for the other, and when the big cat hides amid the jungle foliage, there's clearly a tangible mass lurking in the darkness, not an empty CG void. White pin-prick highlights in the cat's eyes add extra depth.

Image presets cover a wide range of content, and include Cinema Film 1 and 2, Reference, TV, Game, Bright Cinema and Bright TV. If you are using the projector in a media room environment, rather than a fully dark cinema, the Bright Cinema mode is actually quite effective.

There's a clear difference between the two Cinema Film modes, with Cinema Film 1 delivering a brighter overall image, bequeathing a little more pop; some might feel it's more televisual than Cinema Film 2, but I rather like it. Both Reference and TV image modes are rather less contrasty.

I'm less enamoured with the VPL-VW570ES's Motionflow image smoothing, which comes in a variety

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active shutter **4K:** Yes. 4,096 x 2,160 resolution **HDR:** Yes. HDR10; HLG **CONNECTIONS:** 2 x HDMI inputs; RS-232C; USB; 2 x 12V trigger; Ethernet; IR input **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** 1,800 Lumens **CONTRAST (CLAIMED):** 350,000:1 **ZOOM:** 2.06x **DIMENSIONS:** 496(w) x 205(h) x 464(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 14kg

FEATURES: SXRD projector; 6,000-hour claimed lamp life in Low mode; 26dB claimed fan noise; nine image presets; Motionflow motion processing, 4K Reality Creation; HDR Reference mode; motorised zoom, focus and lens shift; vertical lens shift +85/-80%; horizontal lens shift +/-31%; picture position memory; dynamic contrast with advanced iris

PARTNER WITH



PIONEER UDP-LX800: Marry Sony's high-spec projector to Pioneer's wonderfully over-engineered disc spinner (£2,200). Assured video playback goes hand-in-hand with audiophile sonics and a peerless build quality

of strengths: TrueCinema, Smooth Low, Smooth High, Combination and Impulse. My preferred option was almost always the TrueCinema mode, which leaves 24p content unvarnished, and ensures a filmic presentation. The exception to the rule is sports content. Here the projector's image interpolation works reasonably well – just don't tell Tom Cruise you're using it.

Overall operational noise is high, even though Sony only quotes 26dB – the projector only calms down with SDR content. This isn't a major issue, as the VPL-VW570ES is clearly intended for professional installation, which will find it located some way away from any seating position.

The light source is a high-pressure 280W mercury lamp, with a lifespan rated at a somewhat miserly 6,000 hours when the lamp mode is set to Low; if you intend to watch 4K HDR, that lamp life will shorten, so maybe keep a few hundred quid aside for a replacement lamp. A laser light source would obviously last considerably longer, and offer almost instant on, but as the price tag of the VPL-VW870ES demonstrates, the cost would be prohibitive.

First-class 4K

There are plenty of cheaper UHD models available, from both the DLP camp and 3LCD king Epson, but none offer the purity of the VPL-VW570ES's native 4K resolution. In this regard, its only real rival promises to be the similarly priced JVC DLA-N7.

Feature improvements over the Sony VPL-VW270ES may seem minimal, but extra brightness and improved contrast are highly desirable. If you're spec'ing a full-blown cinema, rather than opting for living room or media room installation, it's worth the extra wonga. If you're not looking to add this Sony to a dedicated cinema, then you're probably looking at the wrong projector anyway. It's a first-class true 4K performer, worthy of its own space ■

3. Stepping up to the VW570ES also gets you some gold trim...

4. Sony's upgraded HDMI inputs now support 18Gbps transmission

5. Lost the remote? Use the projector's on-body controls



HCC VERDICT



Sony VPL-VW570ES

→ £8,000 → www.sony.co.uk

WE SAY: This native 4K projector offers a top-flight UHD performance; it's not the brightest model around, but in a dedicated cinema it shines.

Marantz updates its long-running NR flagship for vinyl revivalists and Alexa addicts. **Steve May** offers applause

Slimline cinema sounds exciting



1

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Slimline seven-channel Dolby Atmos AV receiver

POSITION:
The top model in Marantz's NR range

PEERS:
Yamaha RX-S601; Pioneer VSX-S520

Just when you think Marantz's venerable slimline NR receiver range (first introduced, rather sheepishly, back in 2011) is ready for retirement, it bounces back, magically reinvigorated and ready to dance some more. It's the Dick Van Dyke of home cinema hardware.

You could be forgiven for thinking there are no more incremental additions left to make. Last season's NR1608 was a well-specified little belter. But Marantz's engineers have been working away, and have conjured up even more functionality.

The NR1609, in terms of hierarchy, sits above the £500 NR1509, which shares the same form factor but is a 5.1 offering *sans* Atmos. It's nearest full-sized sibling is the 7.1-channel SR5013, which sells for a hefty £200 more.

Cosmetically, there's little new with this season's upgrade. The model adopts the familiar half-height design and characteristic curved fascia seen on previous generations. Nothing wrong with that, of course – the design is a classic, and makes the AVR a lot easier to camouflage in a living room than a full-size model.

Bluetooth and Wi-Fi streaming (plus Ethernet) are offered, as expected. Two Wi-Fi/Bluetooth aerials attach left and right on the receiver's rear.

But always on trend, the NR1609 also now works with Amazon Alexa. You can use voice control to turn the AVR on or off, switch inputs and alter volume. It's also AirPlay 2 compatible. The latter is great news if you inhabit the Apple ecosystem (I'm feigning excitement here, because I'm a Windows/Android enthusiast all the way), letting you play Apple Music, Netflix and YouTube from any iPhone, iPad, Mac or Apple TV device, with (hey) Siri offering basic user control (pause, resume, skip) for music services.

As AirPlay 2 also supports multiroom playback, the NR1609 can function as part of a larger whole-home AirPlay 2 system. But there's also HEOS multiroom functionality onboard, so if you've invested in HEOS active speakers, the AVR can play to or act as a destination for any audio you want to stream around your network.

HEOS also brings with it integrated audio services like Tidal, Spotify Connect and Deezer, via the HEOS app.

Magnificent Seven. Plus one

There's less back panel space here, but Marantz still manages to accommodate seven HDMI inputs (plus another on the front fascia), all compatible with full bandwidth 4K sources. A fresh party trick is the ability to identify each HDR type (HDR10, Dolby Vision, HLG) as part of its video info display. The receiver will also reveal pixel depth and colour space for content sources.

There's only a single HDMI output, however (a feature on some more affordable receivers), which rules this model out if you want to (easily) run both a flatscreen TV and a PJ.

Other terminals are two digital audio inputs (one coaxial, one optical), plus legacy component and phono AV inputs. There's also a stereo output for second zone music. For private listening, take advantage of the full-size headphone jack.

Dolby Atmos and DTS:X compatible, the NR1609 is a seven-channel design, which means it supports either a 5.1.2 Dolby Atmos or 7.1 Dolby Surround configuration, depending on your speaker choice and room layout. I ran the model with a 5.1.2 array, using Dolby upfirsers as part of the front soundstage. The result was a veritable wall of lively sound.

This model also introduces DTS: Virtual X, a post-processing mode that could be useful >



1. Use the front mic socket to get up and running with Audyssey

2. Marantz's handset isn't overly cluttered



if you have a flatbed speaker array (maybe you've yet to buy Atmos modules, or don't want extra boxes in your media room), and want to synthesise height channel audio.

During the setup procedure the receiver is optimised using Audyssey MultEQ room calibration, via a supplied mic. Audyssey does a respectable job, provided you take advantage of its multiple location measurement options (for this review I used 5 of the 6 slots available, all that was required for my chosen listening room); this certainly shouldn't be skipped during the install procedure.

When it comes to internal hardware, there are no significant changes, and as a result the NR1609's audio performance mimics what we experienced with its predecessor. That's to say, it's fast and dynamic, with a particularly refined mid-range. The latter really helps delineate onscreen dialogue. If you've ever bemoaned TV dramas for poor enunciation, you'll be surprised at how clear those mumbling culprits can sound.

The receiver (which has dual subwoofer pre-outs) has no problem executing room-wobbling LFE either, adding enormous weight and impact to its theatrical performance.

While the NR line has never had a surfeit of power, it again proves more than capable of filling the average living room. Marantz quotes a power output of 90W per channel into 6 ohms with a 1kHz signal; a 50W per channel, 8 ohm, 20Hz-20kHz figure is more real-world. With real movies, as long as you don't overdrive it, it sounds consistently smooth.

The aural soundscapes of Ron Fricke's mesmeric travelogue *Samsara* (Blu-ray) ebb and flow like sand in the wind. A more convincing example of sonic immersion you'll be hard pressed to find. Far less tranquil is watery whaling drama *In the Heart of the Sea*. The sledgehammer waves of a storm buffet with almost physical force; the NR1609's soundstage providing a convincing sonic shower.

Thanks to its rapid transient response, action scenes hit with dramatic force, while panning is taut and smooth. Large theatres may be off limits, but for media playrooms and open-plan living environments this is just the ticket.

Precision has long been a watchword for Marantz home theatre, a heritage honoured here. When Diana Prince walks into the Louvre, at the opening of *Wonder Woman* (Ultra HD Blu-ray), her heels are sharply cut from the swelling, ominous Zimmer score. A gift from Bruce Wayne, and then we're on Themyscira, running with the young Amazonian. The NR1609 emphasises the glory and grandeur of the location, even though the Dolby Atmos channel is barely used beyond some birdsong

SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY ATMOS: Yes **DTS:X:** Yes **THX:** No **MULTICHANNEL INPUT:** No **MULTICHANNEL PRE-OUT:** No **MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED):** 7 x 50W (into 8 ohm, 20Hz-20kHz, 0.8% THD) **MULTIROOM:** Yes, Zone 2 **AV INPUTS:** 3 x composite; 2 x digital audio (1 x optical and 1 x coaxial) **HDMI:** Yes, 8 x inputs; 1 x output **VIDEO UPSCALING:** Yes, To 2160p **COMPONENT VIDEO:** Yes, 2 inputs; 1 x output **DIMENSIONS:** 440(w) x 376(d) x 105(h) mm **WEIGHT:** 8.3kg

FEATURES: Audyssey MultEQ; phono stage; AirPlay 2; Amazon Alexa support; HEOS multiroom compatible; DSD (2.8/5.6MHz) and FLAC, WAV, ALAC (24-bit/192kHz) media playback; Ethernet; Wi-Fi; USB; Bluetooth; dual subwoofer outputs; DTS Virtual:X; 32-bit AK4458 DAC

PARTNER WITH



WHARFEDALE DX-2 HCP:

This £450 5.1 bundle features two-way satellites and a relatively compact but punchy sub, and provides cohesive surround sound with great dynamics considering the form factor. Add an extra satellite pair (£100) for 7.1

and Foley ambience. Yet the sonic whole is cohesive, and fittingly epic.

When it comes to stereo, this receiver can hold its own amongst lower mid-range rivals. It's a suitable partner for mid-range speakers, be they standmounts or slim floorstanders, although I suspect it will find itself allied to sub/sat systems. Either way, it will acquit itself well.

Multimedia hub

This is an enviably specified AVR (AirPlay 2, Alexa support and the inclusion of a phono stage for vinyl replay are new additions) that scores high when it comes to usability and audio quality. Everything you need from a multimedia hub is here, be it gaming, music or movie related. Yes, there are AVRs that offer comparable precision and delicacy, but none at this price share the design appeal or functionality ■

3. No second HDMI output, but there are two component video inputs...

HCC VERDICT



Marantz NR1609

→ £650 → www.marantz.co.uk

WE SAY: Marantz expands the appeal of our favourite-sounding slimline Dolby Atmos receiver with AirPlay 2 and Alexa support. A great media room contender.

3



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Steve Withers finds the slicker styling and improved driver tech of B&W's revamped 600 Series hard to resist

Still bullet-proof

If you're looking at Bowers & Wilkins' new 600 Series speakers and thinking that something's missing, you'd be right. Gone are the bright-yellow Kevlar drivers with which the British manufacturer has been synonymous for decades, to be replaced by something even more exotic.

When creating its flagship 800 Series, the company swapped bullet-proof vests for a chemistry set, and indulged in a spot of acoustical alchemy. After eight years of development and more than 70 prototypes, the resulting material was christened 'Continuum', although its exact composition is something of a B&W secret, beyond being a 'coated woven material' offering superior controlled break-up properties than its



AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Standmount 5.1
speaker package

POSITION:
Entry-level, below
the 700 Series

PEERS:
Q Acoustics 3000i;
Acoustic Energy 100;
Monitor Audio
Monitor

Kevlar forebear. B&W rates the performance improvement as similar to a previous material shift: 'We did to the Kevlar cone what we did to the aluminium tweeter dome by using Diamond.'

The manufacturer has now rolled Continuum out through its lineup, including the mid-range 700 and entry-level 600 Series speakers. The latter is a hugely popular line for the company, now on its sixth generation.

How does this latest version compare to previous incarnations? The obvious difference is the addition of the Continuum weave cone bass/midrange drivers. An added bonus is that since the rather garish yellow Kevlar has been replaced with Continuum's tasteful silver, there's more incentive to leave the grilles off.

These new models also use a decoupled double dome aluminium tweeter (there's no diamond here), and are all rated with a nominal impedance of 8 ohm. The speakers boast a cleaner design overall – gone are the grille pegs of yesteryear, swapped for snap-in-place magnets, while the speakers' bass ports have been moved to the rear. There's also a choice of a matt black finish

with a black grille (as photographed here), or satin white and a grey grille.

Stand and deliver

B&W's 600 Series consists of the three-way 603 floorstanding speaker, the 606 and 607 standmount speakers, the HTM6 centre speaker, and a trio of subwoofers. For the purposes of this review, I'm testing a 5.1 system that uses a pair of 606 standmounts (£550) for the front left/right channels, a single HTM6 (£400) for the centre, a pair of 607 standmounts (£400) as the surrounds, and an ASW610 (£500) subwoofer for low-frequency fun.

The 606 is a fairly large standmount model that features a 6.5in Continuum bass/midrange driver mounted below its 1in aluminium tweeter. Build quality is excellent considering the price point, and the styling, while unadventurous, is also refreshingly unobtrusive. In fact, I really like the minimalist appearance of the 600 Series overall: it complements the attractive silver Continuum drivers and matching silver tweeter trim.

1. The larger 606 standmounts (far left) use 6.5in midbass drivers

The 606 has a claimed sensitivity of 88dB and a frequency response rated to go down to 52Hz. On this model, and the rest of the 600 Series passive speakers, you'll find dual binding posts at the rear, handy if you're into bi-wiring or bi-amping.

B&W has reduced the size of the centre channel enclosure in the 600 Series, in the hope that the compact HTM6 will prove more appealing to consumers and less of a placement conundrum. This uses two 5in Continuum bass/midrange drivers, sited either side of its aluminium tweeter. It's a little less sensitive (87dB) and, as is often the case with a centre speaker, the frequency response isn't as deep, going down to 72Hz.

In this package the entry-level 607 standmount speakers are on surround duty. They look almost identical to the larger 606 aside from the smaller (5in) midbass driver. Sensitivity is rated at 84dB, yet frequency response remains at 52Hz.

The final component in this 5.1 array is the ASW610 subwoofer, which uses a sealed cabinet with a forward-firing 10in paper/Aramid fibre cone, driven by 200W of built-in amplification. The styling matches the rest of the range, and there's a choice of rubber or spiked feet to keep the woofer in place.

'Build quality is excellent and B&W's styling, while unadventurous, is also refreshingly unobtrusive'

At the rear is a fairly typical set of controls for line and speaker volume, low-pass frequency settings, and a low-pass filter. There are also three bass extension settings, two EQ settings, and a 0-180 phase switch. In terms of connections there's a choice of stereo phono (use the 'left' socket for an LFE feed from your AVR) and speaker-level inputs, along with a 12V trigger.

As easy as 1, 2, 3... 4, 5, 6

I tested the system in a typical 5.1 configuration, which means the 606 speakers were standmounted either side of my display, while the HTM6 was located on a stand at its bottom centre. The 607 speakers were on stands either side, and just to the rear, of the main listening position, and the ASW610 was at the front of the room away from any walls and corners. I used my reference Arcam AVR850 to drive the five channels.

I should start this section of the review by admitting that since I had been running earlier-generation 600 Series speakers in my setup for over a decade until fairly recently, I thought I had a good idea what to expect. Boy was I wrong...

The addition of the Continuum driver has completely changed the signature of B&W's speakers. The slightly soft midrange that typified the Kevlar weave used previously has largely gone, replaced by a transparency and detail that I simply wasn't expecting.

That's not to say that the smoothness and sense of fun that is traditionally associated with the company's speakers is missing – far from it – but there's now a neutrality and clarity that simply wasn't there before. The result is a set of speakers that blend tonally to render exceptional soundstaging, while the overall system



combines seamlessly to deliver a sonic performance that has both poise and sophistication, and makes the sub-£2,000 ticket price look like an absolute steal.

The 606 standmount speakers demonstrated all these attributes, and proved extremely adept when it came to music replay. However, if you're looking for a system that can handle music and movies in equal measure, then you might want to consider the 603 floorstanders at £1,250 a pair.

Listening to David Bowie's performance from the 2000 Glastonbury Festival (CD), the 606 standmounts displayed a delicious musicality and handled the live recording with an enjoyable sense of accuracy and space. It sounded pretty much like being there, and I should know because I was.

Sharp-shooter

This particular system's strengths really came to the fore once I moved to 5.1-channel soundmixes, and my



first port of call was the new Netflix movie by Joel and Ethan Coen – *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*. This portmanteau of six tales of the Old West has an imaginative soundtrack that the 600 Series conveyed with real gusto.

The opening story includes monologues, singing and gunfights, all of which were delivered with a sharp-shooter's precision: there was a high-frequency zing to the bullets as they zipped around the soundstage.

'The speakers and sub combine to deliver a sonic performance that has both poise and sophistication'

A pitched battle between a stranded cowboy and a group of Native Americans was another stand-out scene and while the Kevlar has gone, the performance of B&W's speakers remains as bullet-proof as ever – even if the characters in the film don't.

So far so good, but it was time try something with lossless resolution. The 4K disc of John Carpenter's sci-fi classic *Escape from New York* has a DTS-HD Master Audio soundtrack, and I was immediately delighted by the 600 Series' rendition of the film's pulsing opening score. There was excellent integration across the front three channels, and plenty of width to the soundstage as these speakers avoid a narrow focus.

Effects were crafted with precision, and there was a unerring tonal balance to the whole system thanks to the use of the same driver technology (albeit not at the same size). The HTM6 handled *Escape From New York*'s dialogue particularly well, and Kurt Russell's delivery in the style of Clint Eastwood has never sounded cooler. However, as good as the film's 5.1 mix is, the transparent nature of the speakers also revealed the limited fidelity of the original source recordings.

Ready for lift off

There are no such limitations when it comes to Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (Ultra HD Blu-ray), which has an exceptionally dynamic DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix. For reasons best known to himself, Nolan eschews today's immersive audio formats, preferring a more traditional multichannel approach. However, it's hard to argue with a full-bodied track like *Interstellar*, which uses every channel to surround its viewer in the action.

Its scenes on the water planet are a great example, with extensive use of the LFE channel as the mountain-high waves approach. The ASW610 did a fine job of delivering the low-end depth, resulting in a sense of impending dread. It also integrated well with the rest of the speakers in the system, resulting in a soundstage with a solid bass foundation. The sub may lack the power of larger and more expensive models – B&W also offers the ASW610XP, which increases amplifier power to 500W and claims a deeper roll-off – but it proved the perfect complement to these speakers.

The system also revealed a nimble responsiveness to changes in dynamic range, as demonstrated during the *Interstellar* sequence where a shuttle tries to dock with its dangerously spinning mothership. The action cuts from the silence of space to the cacophony of

SPECIFICATIONS

606

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 1in decoupled aluminium double dome tweeter; 1 x 6.5in Continuum cone midbass driver **ENCLOSURE:** Rear-ported **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 52Hz-28kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 88dB **POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED):** 120W **DIMENSIONS:** 190(w) x 345(h) x 300(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 6.9kg

HTM6

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 1in decoupled aluminium double dome tweeter; 2 x 5in Continuum cone midbass drivers **ENCLOSURE:** Rear-ported **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 72Hz-28kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 87dB **POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED):** 120W **DIMENSIONS:** 480(w) x 160(h) x 255(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 7.8kg

607

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 1in decoupled aluminium double dome tweeter; 1 x 5in Continuum cone midbass driver **ENCLOSURE:** Rear-ported **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 52Hz-28kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 84dB **POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED):** 100W **DIMENSIONS:** 165(w) x 300(h) x 207(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 4.7kg

ASW610 (subwoofer)

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 10in paper/Aramid Fibre woofer **ENCLOSURE:** Front-firing, sealed **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 27Hz-140Hz **ONBOARD POWER (CLAIMED):** 200W **REMOTE CONTROL:** No **DIMENSIONS:** 310(w) x 310(h) x 375(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 12.5kg **FEATURES:** Stereo phono line-level input; stereo speaker-level input; 0-180 phase switch; level and low-pass frequency settings; low-pass filter; bass extension settings; EQ settings; automatic standby; 12V trigger

PARTNER WITH



QED XT25: Treat your new speaker pack to some new speaker wire in the shape of QED's XT25. Pricing is £6 per metre but unterminated – so opt for banana plug or spade terminals at both ends (£20 for a quartet) for an easy installation

sounds inside the vehicle, with all five speakers and the woofer uniting to cocoon the viewer within the buckling fuselage.

However, thanks to the mid-range heft and focused nature of the centre speaker, dialogue was projected with perfect clarity – aside from the moments where Nolan deliberately muffles voices as a creative choice. Overall the dynamic and immersive nature of the film's soundtrack revealed a system that was both revealing and authoritative when it came to multichannel movie sound. Which is exactly what potential buyers will be looking for.

Exceptional value

Bowers & Wilkins' 600 Series offers exceptional value to system builders, with a finish and performance far in excess of its price point. Trickle-down technology from premium models to affordable alternatives isn't a new story, but the switch to Continuum cones pays dividends here; the sound is precise, transparent and hugely entertaining. This system is sure to please existing fans of the 600 Series, and will also gain it plenty of new ones ■

HCC VERDICT



Bowers & Wilkins 600 Series 5.1

→ £1,850 → www.bowers-wilkins.co.uk

WE SAY: A detailed, neutral, and hugely enjoyable sound performance from a well-constructed 5.1 pack – proof that Bowers & Wilkins can do affordable as well as high-end.

2. Each speaker has two sets of well-spaced binding posts

3. B&W's sub offers two roll-off EQ presets – 'A' is suggested for corner placement



Wharfedale aims for an epic Vista

Can this cash-conscious soundbar/sub system continue the brand's great work in the affordable audio arena? **Mark Craven** investigates

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Stereo soundbar/
subwoofer combi

POSITION:
One of only two
soundbars in
Wharfedale's
current lineup

PEERS:
Panasonic
SC-HTB258;
LG SJ4;
JBL Bar 2.1

WHARFEDALE ISN'T LIKE many other loudspeaker companies. It largely ignores the high-end market and focuses on affordable, crowd-pleasing designs. Recently we've seen examples of this ethos in its Diamond 11 HCP and DX-2 5.1 packages, both offering excellent value for money. So when it launches a soundbar-plus-subwoofer system for less than £250, it catches our attention.

The Vista 200S (priced £230) is actually the more potent of two new Wharfedale models. The other, the Vista 200, is about £100 cheaper and doesn't come with a subwoofer – hence the additional 'S'.

No lost ARC here

Spec-wise the Vista 200S is basic, but not entry-level. While it lacks the voice control smarts, virtual surround modes, Dolby Atmos integration and multiroom skills of pricier soundbars, it does offer some useful features.

Chief among these is ARC connectivity. There's no dedicated input for an external video source, but the 'bar can be fed audio from your TV via HDMI. Additionally there

are both coaxial and optical digital audio inputs, and a 3.5mm jack. Wireless Bluetooth streaming is also offered, because it's 2019 and any active speaker on the planet without Bluetooth will get some funny looks.

Another user-friendly aspect is the cable-free connection between soundbar and subwoofer. All you need for the latter is a mains power connection and away you go. And while the woofer has a 'pair' button to sync with the 'bar, I found this wasn't needed – it connected automatically.

The subwoofer is slightly unusual as it uses a slim cabinet, standing tall like a cereal box. It doesn't need to be gigantic, however, as the woofer is only a 6.5in design. The in-built amplifier is rated at a moderate 60W.

The soundbar is also relatively compact, measuring 90cm wide. It's a good fit for TVs 55in and below, but might look a little odd partnered with larger sets.

A mesh grille runs along the whole front edge, leading into a black gloss plastic wrap that curves around its rear and opens up to accommodate the back-side connectivity. The soundbar looks quite stylish, but feels lightweight.



2

Built-in feet raise it off your TV furniture a little, and a wall mount bracket is supplied.

There's no display window, with coloured LEDs behind the grilles operating as status notifiers. Also lurking behind here are full-range drivers at either end, joined by reflex ports to improve bass delivery. Each driver gets a 30W amp.

Top-panel buttons cover source and volume adjustments, but most will use the remote control, which also has keys for preset audio modes and bass volume. Be warned: this handset is absolutely tiny, so don't lose it. Yes, if connected via HDMI you can use your display's handset to govern volume, but having access to the bass level adjustment in particular is useful.

This feature offers five steps (go for a sixth in either direction and the LED light blinks slowly). For movies, I preferred it at maximum, but often nudged it down for broadcast TV shows. It's worth experimenting with both the level of the woofer and its placement in your room.

Full-frontal

Placement of the bar is also important in getting the best from the Vista 200S, as sit either too far horizontally or vertically off-axis and the sound from its front-firing drivers loses body, something's that's particularly noticeable with music. Tunes streamed from Bluetooth don't, in truth,

'Onscreen FX, such as cars racing left to right, gain a sense of placement, drawing you into the action'

find the soundbar particularly impressive – there's only a modicum of difference when using Wharfedale's Music preset over Movie mode, and enjoyment of your favourite tunes is hampered by a lack of resolution and upper register solidity. It's adequate for everyday listening (especially electronic music) and the affordable price tag.

With TV and movie material the soundbar puts on a much better show, particularly as the subwoofer gets more of a chance to lay a foundation for the bar's stereo drivers. Switching from the onboard speakers of a flatscreen TV to this soundbar/sub upgrade brings immediate benefits in terms of the depth of the soundstage.

The jeep/military convoy attack sequence of *Fast & Furious 6* (Chapter 15, theatrical version, Ultra HD Blu-ray) becomes the cinematic event its creators intended. As the camera swoops across the beach, the soundtrack pounds with meaty bass while seagulls squawk and waves crash. Owen Shaw's Jeep rams the vehicle ahead, causing a squeal of tires above the rumbling engines. There's more dynamism here at the bottom end than the top; treble

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x full-range drivers **AMPLIFICATION (CLAIMED):** 2 x 30W, plus 60W subwoofer **CONNECTIONS:** 1 x HDMI ARC; optical digital audio input; coaxial digital audio input; 3.5mm input **DOLBY ATMOS/DTS:X:** No/No **SEPARATE SUBWOOFER:** Yes. 6.5in driver **REMOTE CONTROL:** Yes **DIMENSIONS (SOUNDBAR):** 900(w) x 62(h) x 92(d)mm **WEIGHT (SOUNDBAR):** N/A

FEATURES: Integrated Bluetooth; Movie, Music and News EQ presets; bass level adjustment; wall mount fixings supplied; on-body controls; LED status lights; wireless subwoofer

PARTNER WITH



PANASONIC DP-UB320: Keep your system compact and wallet-friendly with Panasonic's diminutive Ultra HD Blu-ray/HDR10 player. While the DP-UB320 launched at £200 last year, it's now available for under £100

details can sound a bit flat and lacking in attack in comparison. That said, when Shaw's goons start strafing the rooftop of the military truck with a machine gun, the sound of the bullets piercing metal cuts through the rest of the mix. When the truck crashes and its tank cargo rolls on to the highway, the woofer bravely tries to convey the soundtrack's seismic LFE.

For something more down to earth, I switched to *Dynasties* (Ultra HD Blu-ray). The nature doc's DTS-HD MA 5.1 mixes find David Attenborough's distinctive narration in full voice – clean, authoritative and well-projected. The strings of the original score have body, and the animal and insect noises that fill out the soundmix on the *Prairie Dog* episode are also well-defined. The BBC's judicious use of LFE to dramatise the visuals again finds Wharfedale's slim sub able to reach reasonably low. And in terms of volume, this 'bar has a surprising capacity to reach high without its delivery falling apart.

The Vista 200S's stereo presentation is also good; Creedence Clearwater Revival's *Susie Q* flits vocals from one channel to another, and it's a trick not lost here. With movies, the bar's ability to create a wide field dovetails with its low-end prowess to boost its theatrical impact. Onscreen FX, such as cars racing left to right in the *F&F* sequence, gain a sense of placement, drawing you into the action. There's little verticality to the soundstage, though, so don't expect a 'wall' of sound.'

Solid addition

Overall, Wharfedale's Vista 200S is a solid addition to the affordable soundbar market, balancing a rather indistinct high-frequency performance with robust bass and volume on tap. The remote is fiddly and comically small, but for much of the time you won't need to use it. Neither compact nor full-size (although the sub is usefully discreet), the Vista 200S is worth considering for a mid-size TV setup ■

1. You shouldn't have a problem finding space for the slim subwoofer

2. When the Vista 200S is synced with a Bluetooth device, it shouts 'PAIRED' at you

HCC VERDICT



Wharfedale Vista 200S

→ £230 → www.wharfedale.co.uk

WE SAY: Low-end solidity, stereo presentation and HDMI ARC connectivity/control are the highlights of this budget soundbar/sub system.



Covering all angles

Sony's current flagship TV finally solves LCD's viewing angle issues – but only at the expense of problems elsewhere, says **John Archer**

SONY'S KD-65ZD9 TV [launched in 2016, reviewed in *HCC* #267] was a classic. Its cutting-edge lighting system introduced a new level of picture quality. It's fair to say, then, that I couldn't have been more excited by the arrival of that set's successor, the 65ZF9. But, while this high-price LCD delivers marked improvements in some areas, it's ultimately let down by an unexpected surprising new flaw – disappointing black levels. More on that later...

Big, but not beautiful

The 65ZF9 isn't the world's sexiest TV. Once assembled upon its oversized feet, it's pretty much just a black rectangle with a chunkier-than-usual back end. It is extremely well built, though.

Its connections are forward-thinking. The four HDMI's all handle 4K HDR at up to 60Hz, and there's even support for 'eARC' capability, where the TV can pass object-based audio, such as Dolby Atmos, to compatible AV receivers/soundbars. There's also provision for file playback via Bluetooth, DLNA and USB stick.

The 65ZF9 delivers a number of major feature boosts over its ZD9 ancestor. Most noticeably, it carries the new Android TV 8.0 smart interface. This isn't

perfect – the way its home page takes over the whole screen is annoying – but its far more slick and stable than previous Android implementations on Sony flatscreens, and features some helpful design and organisation refinements.

The 65ZF9 also works with Google Assistant voice control, and supports Chromecasting from compatible devices.

More significant from a home cinema movie-watching perspective is the ZF9's use of Sony's newer X1 Ultimate processor. This promises to deliver improved 4K upscaling and better colour accuracy; more refined SDR to HDR conversion; a Netflix Calibrated mode that adjusts the TV's settings to get close to those used by Netflix content creators; greater motion handling; and revolutionary viewing angle improvements.

These latter two X1 Ultimate benefits warrant further attention. The processor's motion improvements combine new algorithms with the Sony X-Motion Clarity system first introduced on the brand's X900F TVs. This partners black frame insertion (BFI) technology with the TV's local dimming engine, to counter the dullness usually associated with BFI systems.

AV INFO

PRODUCT:

4K HDR LCD TV with direct lighting and local dimming

POSITION:

Master Series – Sony's 2018 flagship

PEERS:

Samsung QE65Q9FN;
Panasonic TX-65FZ952

The viewing angle upgrade sees the X1 Ultimate processor working in tandem with a new optical panel design. The result is effective viewing angles (before contrast and colour drop off disastrously) that nearly match those of OLED TVs. This is a huge leap for LCD technology, and forms part of Sony's strategy for getting such displays as close as possible to the picture quality of its BVM-X300 OLED studio mastering monitor.

'It's hard to think of another set that delivers such a consistently crisp picture without looking forced'

As with the ZD9, the ZF9 is a VA panel that uses direct lighting and local dimming. Surprisingly, though, where the ZD9 had more than 600 dimming zones, the ZF9 only has around 100. The company says its new local dimming algorithms should compensate for the dimming zone reduction. This step-down in back-lighting nuance no doubt part explains why the 65ZF9, at around £2,400, is much cheaper at launch than its predecessor, which hit retailers at £4,000.

Grey matter

So, what's my gripe about the TV's black levels? Well, the lovely deep, rich blacks of the ZD9 have been replaced here by a pervasive wash of greyness, along with distracting amounts of backlight blooming around stand-out bright objects. The cigarette lighter-lit form of Patrick Hockstetter, as he foolishly explores the dark sewers in *It* (Ultra HD Blu-ray), is a perfect example of a TV struggling to cope with a (tricksy) source. And this is despite the ZF9 taking advantage of Dolby Vision's contrast improvements with the *It* 4K BD.

I can only speculate about what's caused this problem. Presumably it's a combination of the reduced number of local dimming zones and new viewing angle technologies. But whatever the reason, its effect on picture quality is unfortunate to say the least.

Trying to put this disappointment aside, there's no doubt the X1 Ultimate processor is able to conjure some impressive, eye-catching image quality elsewhere. The colour refinement on show throughout *It* is exemplary, for instance. There's no striping in the ironically bright skies above Derry, while the demonic clown and his portentous balloons enjoy a gorgeously three-dimensional look, thanks to the way the X1 Ultimate processor delineates even the most minute colour shift.

This revelatory colour tone ability also makes largescale shots, such as those across Derry's rooftops or around the town's lake, look extremely sharp and detailed. As 4K, in fact, as I've ever seen them. Credit where it's due: it's hard to think of another set that delivers such a consistently crisp picture without looking forced or obviously processed.

Motion is handled superbly by the new X1 Ultimate/X-Motion Clarity hookup, ensuring that judder appears natural, and motion blur is pretty much

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: No **4K:** Yes. 3,840 x 2,160 **HDR:** Yes. HDR10; HLG; Dolby Vision **TUNER:** Yes. Freeview HD; satellite HD **CONNECTIONS:** 4 x HDMI inputs; 3 x USB; Ethernet; headphone output; optical digital audio output; composite video; RF input **SOUND (CLAIMED):** 2 x 10W **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** N/A **CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED):** N/A **DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND):** 1,453(w) x 837(h) x 67(d)mm **WEIGHT (OFF STAND):** 28.2kg

FEATURES: X1 Ultimate processing engine; SDR to HDR conversion; X-Wide viewing angle; direct LED backlight; local dimming; Netflix Calibrated mode; full calibration toolset; built-in Wi-Fi; USB/network media playback; Android 8 OS

PARTNER WITH



IT: Prepare for this year's sequel with Warner Bros' accomplished Ultra HD Blu-ray release of the chilling Stephen King adaptation – a Dolby Atmos mix heightens the sense of terror, while Dolby Vision visuals offer testing demo scenes.

non-existent even during *It*'s slyly fluid panning shots. The TV lives up to its 'Clarity' billing.

The 65ZF9's image is also phenomenally bright. A measured 1,500 nits on a 10 per cent white HDR window in Vivid and Cinema modes doesn't reach the over 2,000 nits delivered by Sony's 1,000-dimming zone 100in ZD9 TV, but is still a top-tier figure, and hugely important to unlocking the potential of the HDR and wide colour features of 4K Blu-ray. Strangely, the light output drops to around 1,250 nits in the all-round best Standard mode – perhaps in a bid to reduce the greyness and blooming problems?

Having mentioned blooming again, I'll add that colours can lose some of their naturalism where it appears. And the general greyness over dark scenes can skew the accuracy of darker tones.

Joining the mixed movie playback is a good but not flawless audio performance. There's power and volume aplenty from the 2 x 10W speaker array, exhibiting clean, pure treble details and a decent amount of uncoloured bass. The soundstage spreads far beyond the TV without losing cohesion, meaning *It*'s creepy mix keeps you on edge. Voices sometimes seem to be coming from below the screen, however.

Close encounter

The KD-65ZF9 is overall massively frustrating. There's so much great stuff going on here that it could have joined its predecessor in setting new TV standards. Viewing angle, sharpness and HDR highlighting are all exceptional. But the image quality highlights are pushed into the background by the TV's black level failings, meaning its 'Master Series' billing doesn't quite ring true ■

HCC VERDICT



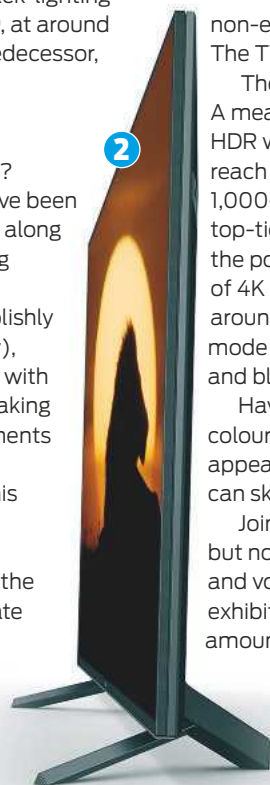
Sony KD-65ZF9

→ £2,400 → www.sony.co.uk

WE SAY: Sony gets a lot right with this innovative, intelligent 4K LCD TV, but it doesn't retain the cinematic appeal of its ZD9 predecessor.

1. This is the smaller ZF9 model – a 75in version sells for around £5,000

2. The TV uses direct LED lighting with a local dimming engine





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Affordable 55in TV shootout

Can John Archer find a 4K HDR bargain for less than £800?
Screens from Cello, Hisense, Philips and Samsung fight for his approval

**CELLO C55SFS4K**

Brit brand brings Quantum Dots to the mainstream

HISENSE 55A6200

Bargain-priced LCD with Freeview Play integration

PHILIPS 55PUS6753

Direct-lit LCD TV with Ambilight and SAPHI smarts

SAMSUNG 55NU7300

Remember curved TVs? Samsung does...

Cello C55SFS4K QLED

UK-produced set looks the part and partners Quantum Dot tech with Android smarts



ONCE BITTEN

Tom Hardy stars in comic book caper *Venom* on 4K BD, p92

PATRIOTIC SORTS THAT we are, we'd love to love the Cello C55SFS4K QLED. It is, after all, a TV that's born and bred in the UK.

Sadly, though, it doesn't put Britain on the TV hardware map as convincingly as we'd hoped.

First impressions are strong. From its narrow metallic bezel to its startlingly thin, gleaming silver rear it looks more like a high-end OLED TV than a relatively affordable LCD model. Its half-moon stand is also elegant – if fatty to build.

It's well connected, too, with four HDMI's, two USBs, an Ethernet port and built-in Wi-Fi ticking the boxes.

Extremely unusually for a sub-£800 TV, the C55SFS4K QLED uses Quantum Dots to paint its colours. These can usually run brighter and deliver more colour volume than standard LCD colour filters – handy for playing back the HDR10 high dynamic range content the set supports.

Smart features are provided by an Android platform. This provides access to a huge range of apps, but menus are a bit clunky by modern standards. Unfortunately, it also seems to be using a tablet Android system, not a bespoke TV one – certainly the clients for Netflix and Amazon Prime Video are the tablet versions, which means no HDR or 4K. The Netflix picture appears somewhat compressed, too.

The TV's remote control is also a let-down. Its buttons are cramped, poorly organised and badly labelled, and while its point and click

and 'mouse' options sound promising, they end up adding an extra layer of confusion.

Poetry not in motion

Feeding the Cello the 4K Blu-ray of Shane Black's *The Predator* reveals some flaws. First and worst, motion handling with 24p sources is sub-par, plagued constantly by significant juddering and blurring. And there's no motion processing to help things out.

A night-time scrap between two aliens, meanwhile, shows some uninspiring backlight management. There's obvious greyness over the supposedly black skies and distracting areas of clouding crop up over various parts of the screen. I suspect Cello's ultra-slim design hasn't helped in this regard.

The Predator 4K BD's colours also cause the TV some issues. Dark scenes tend to look too blue, while greyish tones – such as the interior of the Predator ship – can take on a strange magenta hue. And while it wasn't a big issue with *The Predator*, various other titles revealed some heavy colour banding in HDR content in areas such as skies and swirling smoke.

Bright HDR exteriors in *The Predator* also suffer with severe clipping (detail loss). So much so that different sky colour shades can appear as glowing 'clumps'.

There are decent things about the Cello QLED's pictures. They look slightly brighter than those of some TVs in this roundup (though it only hits 300 nits on a 10 per cent

white HDR window); there's a decent amount of detail visible in dark areas; and relatively static 4K sources can look crisp.

The Predator also looks better in its HD, SDR form. Colours are more natural and balanced, and black levels more convincing. You're slightly less aware, too, of the motion softness, and there's no more distracting clipping in the brightest parts of the picture.

A slightly high 57ms input lag time damages the TV's potential as a gaming monitor, while its sound performance suffers with minimal bass and a generally thin and muffled tone that's routinely over-powered by *The Predator*'s robust action-movie mix.

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: No **4K:** Yes, 3,840 x 2,160 **HDR:** Yes. HDR10 **TUNER:** Yes. Freeview HD **CONNECTIONS:** 4 x HDMI inputs; 2 x USB; Ethernet; microSD card slot; stereo analogue audio input; composite video input; RF input; optical digital audio output; headphone jack **SOUND (CLAIMED):** 2 x 8W **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** 200 cd/m2 **CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED):** 1,200:1 **DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND):** 1,236(w) x 714(h) x 51(d)mm **WEIGHT (OFF STAND):** 14.5kg

FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; USB multimedia playback/timeshifting; QLED colour technology; Android OS

Hisense 55A6200

Not a massively bright HDR experience, but this direct-lit LCD puts up a good show



HISENSE'S 55A6200 ISN'T much of a looker. It's plasticky black screen frame and chunky rear make it look like a throw back to 2007. At least its feet are more elegant than most.

Its remote is much more friendly than the Cello's, though. It's sparsely and logically laid out, and provides direct buttons for Netflix, Amazon Prime, YouTube and Rakuten. It also carries the Freeview Play app to bring together catchup of the UK's main terrestrial broadcasters. Netflix, Amazon Prime and YouTube are available in 4K and HDR.

The smart interface looks dated, and a fair number of its apps are of little interest. But getting even a half-decent smart hub on a £430 55in 4K TV is arguably a bonus.

The set supports HDR10 via its three HDMI inputs, and carries both gamma and colour calibration tools.

HDR, kinda

Its HDR10 talents are to some extent 'name only', on account of the screen being capable of delivering only around 218 nits of brightness on a 10 per cent white HDR window. This is barely beyond SDR brightness territory, really. And the colour range the set can deliver struggles to best REC.709 values, which can leave the 55A6200's hues looking a touch under-saturated with HDR content.

This doesn't mean, though, that the 55A6200 gives a poor account of itself with

our *The Predator* 4K Blu-ray. There's neither the banding nor the glowing colour blocks in bright HDR scenes seen on the Cello set, and aside from some occasionally slightly jaundiced skin tones, the 4K BD's colours look more natural and balanced, if a bit pallid. Black levels, too, are noticeably deeper, and the screen is less affected by distracting backlight clouding, due, most likely, to its use of a direct rather than edge-lit panel.

While the 55A6200 maps *The Predator* 4K Blu-ray's aggressive HDR transfer to its screen's capabilities quite cleverly, I will stress again that the result doesn't really look like HDR – but at least it doesn't look horrible with such content, which is more than can be said for many similarly cheap LCD TVs. And it does also feel like genuine 4K: clean, sharp and detailed. The final extended scrap with the super Predator generates pleasingly little motion blur.

The 55A6200 performs excellently for its money, with the SDR Blu-ray version of *The Predator*. The combination of sharpness, colour richness/fineness and contrast is excellent for such an affordable set.

There are one or two significant issues. While motion blur is contained, there is noticeable judder with 24p sources. And as with the Cello, there's no processing to counter this. You should avoid the HDR Dynamic picture preset too, if you don't want the picture to suddenly turn nasty. Hisense's two noise

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: No **4K:** Yes. 3,840 x 2,160 **HDR:** Yes. HDR10 **TUNER:** Yes. Freeview HD **CONNECTIONS:** 3 x HDMI inputs; 2 x USB; composite video input; optical digital audio output; Ethernet; phono stereo audio input; RF input **SOUND (CLAIMED):** 20W **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** N/A **CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED):** N/A **DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND):** 1,242(w) x 726(h) x 73(d)mm **WEIGHT (OFF STAND):** 14kg

FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; USB multimedia playback; direct backlight; VIDAA smart system with 4K HDR apps; Freeview Play

reduction systems are also best avoided if you're watching native 4K.

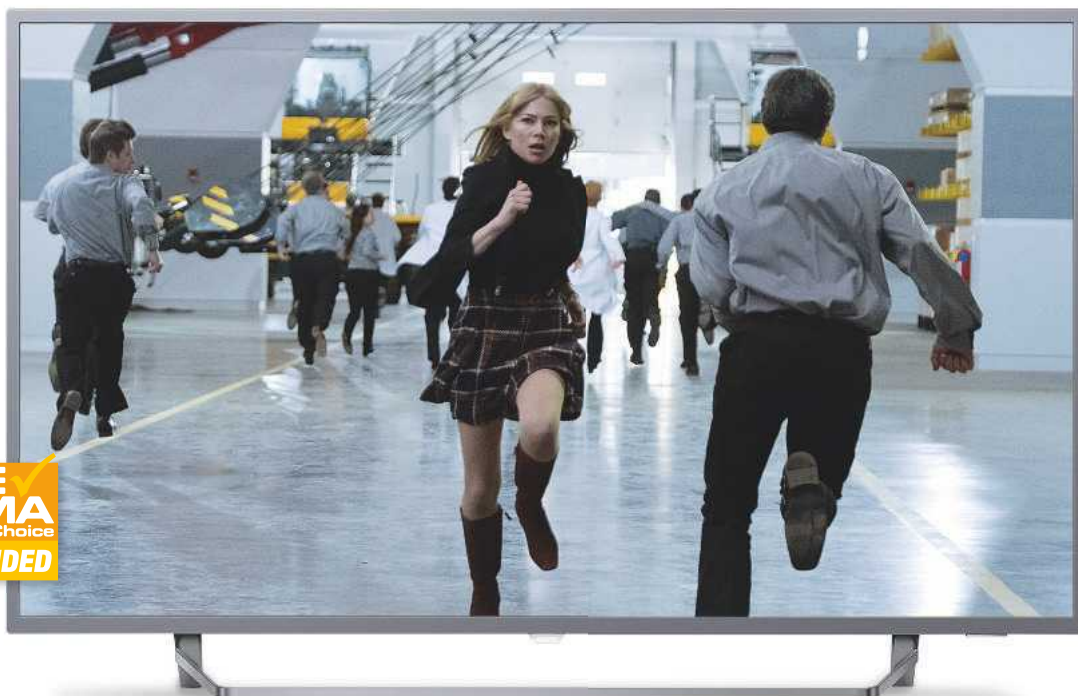
Finally, the set loses subtle detail and tones in bright areas. Bright skies above the weapons market in *The Predator* look almost entirely white in HDR on the 55A6200, rather than nuanced and shaded.

I'll wrap up, though, on a couple of positives. A very respectable 24ms input lag is sure to boost its appeal to gamers, and its audio performance is surprisingly solid for the money. It can become a touch shrill during *The Predator*'s densest soundtrack moments, but it's strong with dialogue and detail, and has enough power to expand at least a bit to accommodate the film's loudest excesses. ➤

Philips 55PUS6753

Ambilight? Check. 4K VOD apps? Check. Brilliant black levels? Check. And a price cut too...

**HOME
CINEMA**
Choice
RECOMMENDED



WHILE PHILIPS HAS got its European brand back on track with its high-end OLED TVs, it hasn't ignored the budget arena. Which is good, as it leads to TVs like the 55PUS6753.

When we tested this screen back in the Summer, it impressed us even at £700. Now, though, you can pick one up for just £480, making it almost irresistible.

The sheer amount of tech you get for so little money is remarkable. Its slightly plasticky silver bodywork is partnered with Philips' Ambilight technology. This fires out pools of coloured light onto your wall from the TV's top, left and right sides. Set the lights to track the colour and intensity of the pictures you're watching to bolster your immersion.

The VA-type LCD screen uses direct backlighting, with lights sited behind the screen rather than around its edge, which helps it deliver an enhanced contrast. However – understandably for the money – there's no local dimming engine.

The remote control innovates, too, by sporting an excellent full QWERTY keyboard on its reverse side, while smart features are delivered on a Linux-based platform called SAPHI. This does a solid if occasionally sluggish job of providing access to a good selection of video apps, including Netflix, Amazon, Rakuten and YouTube. There's Freeview Play, too.

Connections are a touch limited by the standards of this group test, in that only two of

the three HDMI's support 4K up to 60Hz, but that will likely still be enough for typical users.

As with all the other TVs here, the most instantly obvious sign of the 55PUS6753's budget nature is its lack of brightness. It delivers just 287 nits on our 10 per cent white HDR window. This inevitably limits its HDR potential; as with its rivals, it only gives a very slight increase in dynamic range over SDR pictures.

It does have an ace up its sleeve, though, in the shape of the best black levels in this roundup. Even with HDR sources dark parts of the picture remain convincingly, consistently black. This gives pictures a foundation to build on, helping the set's colours feel enjoyably rich and emphasising the very slight increase in peak brightness with HDR.

It's not quite as bright as the Samsung 55NU7300 (see p64) with HDR content. This is most noticeable during *The Predator's* daylight outdoor sequences. The Philips set does, however, deliver a more consistent sense of a greater dynamic range, due to its generally superior black level performance.

It's marginally more at home with SDR playback, but still remaps HDR sources to its screen's capabilities with some panache, except for quite marked 'clipping' (detail loss) in the very brightest areas.

The TV delivers excellent sharpness with both upscaled HD and native 4K sources. This sharpness is particularly impressive if you use

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: No **4K:** Yes. 3,840 x 2160 **HDR:** Yes. HDR10 **TUNER:** Yes. Freeview HD **CONNECTIONS:** 3 x HDMI inputs, 2 x USB; component video; Ethernet port; analogue stereo audio input; headphone jack; satellite connector; RF port **SOUND (CLAIMED):** 20W **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** N/A **CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED):** N/A **DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND):** 1,244(w) x 729(h) x 78.2(d)mm **WEIGHT (OFF STAND):** 15.3kg

FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; USB multimedia playback; Pixel Precise Ultra HD processing engine; SAPHI Linux-based smart system; three-sided Ambilight; direct lighting

Philips' Super Resolution processor and the Low setting of the Natural Motion options.

Temptation game

Aside from joining its competitors in only offering a dialled-down HDR experience, my only serious complaints about the 55PUS6753's performance are that its upscaled pictures can look a touch 'gritty', and that its sound is severely lacking in bass (although it does have a powerful and open mid and upper range, allowing it to sound detailed without being harsh). Add in an input lag measurement of 18ms using the TV's Game mode and you have a real tempter. ➤

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Samsung UE55NU7300

This curved contender, with HDR10+, stands out from the crowd



OTHER BRANDS HAVE now abandoned curved TVs, but the technology's 'inventor', Samsung, still ships a few models, including the UE55NU7300 tested here.

Curved screens don't contribute anything much to the viewing experience on 55in TVs. In fact, they can look a little odd when wall mounted or viewed from an extreme angle. In other situations, though, the curve can look quite cute – despite being delivered here in rather plasticky bodywork.

Curved sets also generally cost more than flat ones. The UE55NU7300, though, is currently available for just £580, which is very competitive for a big, ostensibly mid-range 4K TV from a major brand.

The UE55NU7300 uses an edge-lit VA panel. Its Standard picture mode appears to operate a 'whole frame' dimming system to boost contrast, too. There's no local dimming, but the frame dimming is still a significant feature, as we'll see.

Samsung's smart system is the most accomplished in this group test, with an interface that's slick, compact, easy to customise and content-rich. Netflix, Amazon, YouTube and Rakuten apps all support 4K and HDR, and even the 55NU7300's remote is logically organised and responsive.

In some ways, Samsung's picture heritage makes its presence felt even on this

unexpectedly affordable model. Upscaling of *The Predator* HD Blu-ray to 4K is particularly impressive, delivering cleaner, sharper results.

HDR looks a tad brighter than on the Cello, Hisense and Philips sets, with slightly more intensity to the Predators' green blood, for instance. The extent to which the 55NU7300 can do justice to HDR, though, is restricted by a measured light output of 300 nits on a 10 per cent white HDR window. This also limits the extent to which the TV can exploit its unique (in this roundup) support for HDR10+.

Samsung's processing prowess ensures there's plenty of colour and shade subtlety in its pictures, both SDR and HDR. While there is clipping of detail in the brightest HDR areas, it's less aggressive than on the Cello and Hisense challengers. Native 4K images look pristinely sharp, and the colour palette is rich.

Black levels can be good, but there's a complication. In Standard preset mode, the picture dims the backlight during dark shots to boost black level response. This elicits pretty deep blacks for a £580 TV but can also prove a distraction, especially as the backlight adjustments can be sluggish. The Movie mode is more stable, but dark scenes look greyer, particularly with HDR sources. At least I couldn't see any of the backlight 'bleeding' sometimes spotted on curved TVs.

The bottom line is that while the 55NU7300 makes a bolder bid for HDR glory

than its rivals, that bid causes a couple of niggles the set might otherwise not have.

Back to its strengths: input lag in Game mode is just 10-12ms – as low a measurement as you'll find in the TV world – and while no setting of its motion controls yields perfect results, there are at least options for countering motion softness, including a black frame insertion mode and various settings of motion interpolation – choosing Custom on the latter with a judder reduction value of three delivers a fairly balanced result. And sonically, the 55NU7300 is the pick of this budget bunch, with a speaker system powerful enough to deliver a wide, detailed mid-range, and clean dialogue.

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: No **4K:** Yes. 3,840 x 2,160 **HDR:** Yes. HDR10; HDR10+ **TUNER:** Yes. Freeview HD **CONNECTIONS:** 3 x HDMI inputs; composite video; optical digital audio output; RF input; 2 x USB; Ethernet, component input **SOUND (CLAIMED):** 20W **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** N/A **CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED):** N/A **DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND):** 1,236(w) x 714.9(h) x 104(d)mm **WEIGHT (OFF STAND):** 18.2kg

FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; USB multimedia playback; Eden smart platform; motion processing with Black Frame Insertion mode; curved screen

Final standings

THIS GROUPTTEST PROVES again that if you buy a budget bigscreen TV, you have to accept that you're only going to get a very limited high dynamic range performance. None of the TVs featured here – not even the discounted Samsung and Philips models – are bright enough to do much justice to HDR.

That said, the best budget sets are now doing a better job of 'mapping' HDR sources to their screen's capabilities. And provided you can live with the HDR limitations, some of today's models are also now doing great things when it comes to sharpness and motion.

In last place here is the Cello C55SFS4K QLED. Motion and backlight problems pretty much negate its use of Quantum Dots, leaving it as the weakest performer of the four – despite it being the most expensive.

In third place is the Samsung 55NU7300. This is quite a surprise, in some ways, but while there are areas where it shines, its curved design seems more a hindrance than a help, and it doesn't ultimately deliver quite enough control over its edge lighting to match its ambitions.

In second is the Hisense 55A6200. This comes up short of our winner, the Philips 55PUS6753, by not having quite such good pictures or as attractive a design. It is, though, £50 cheaper.

The Philips 55PUS6753 is worth that slightly higher outlay. Its picture quality is a class apart for the sub-£500 TV market, its smart features are strong, and Ambilight ensures that it looks like a TV worth hundreds of pounds more. Which, actually, is exactly what it was originally designed to be ■



HCC VERDICT

Cello C55SFS4K QLED

→ £780 → www.celloelectronics.com



Hisense 55A6200

→ £430 → www.hisense.co.uk



Philips 55PUS6753

→ £480 → www.philips.co.uk



Samsung UE55NU7300

→ £580 → www.samsung.co.uk



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Panasonic player has do-it-all attitude

The DP-UB820 sits in a hinterland between the range-topping DP-UB9000 and the cut-price DP-UB420, and offers HDR10+ and Dolby Vision playback. [Steve May](#) ponders its value

THERE'S NOT MUCH choice if you want a Dolby Vision-capable 4K Blu-ray player to partner a Dolby Vision TV, but don't want to blow your cash on a high-end offering like the Panasonic DP-UB9000 or Pioneer UDP-LX500. Typically, it's been a coin toss between the Sony UBP-X700 and LG UBK90, the latter an upgrade on the previous UP970.

But now there's a third way. Panasonic's DP-UB820 is a mid-range proposition, positioned north of the entry-level DP-UB420, and supports both Dolby Vision and rival dynamic metadata standard HDR10+, the platform created by 20th Century Fox, Panasonic and Samsung.

While only a handful of titles that utilise HDR10+ are available at the time of writing (see page 30 for more), it's good to know compatibility is waiting (remember you'll need a matching TV, too).

So does this model represent a sweet spot when it comes to HDR Blu-ray players? Well, not exactly.

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Dolby Vision/
HDR10+ compatible
4K Blu-ray player

POSITION:
Upper mid-range,
above the
DP-UB420

PEERS:
Sony UBP-X700;
LG UBK90

Middle brow Blu-ray

While the specification appears to ape the brand's flagship, the cosmetics borrow from Panasonic's budget model. It's nearly, but not quite, an update on the well regarded 2016-era DMP-UB900.

Build quality is unapologetically mass market, but for all that, the model looks entirely passable. The plastic cabinet is gloss black, while a bevelled frontage drops

down to reveal the offset disc tray. There's also a USB port for media playback. Manual buttons sit up top to handle power and disc loading.

Rear connectivity includes twin HDMI (one an audio only output, for those using a pre-4K AV receiver who need to route UHD video directly to a screen); Ethernet; another USB (a speedy 3.0 connection); and an optical digital audio output. Wi-Fi comes as standard if you don't want to stay tethered.

There's also a full 7.1 bank of phono analogue audio outs should you need a direct analogue 7.1 connection – a feature that marks this player out as higher-spec than its Sony and LG rivals. However, it's worth noting that you can't configure the player to output both analogue stereo or full 7.1 analogue audio, as well as audio via HDMI. It's an either/or option. Given that most users will want to employ the player in a home theatre environment, bitstreaming Dolby Atmos or rival DTS:X audio, this flatbed 7.1 analogue output is therefore unlikely to find many takers.

The player ships with a compact, unglamorous IR remote. This has a dedicated Netflix button, pointing to the DP-UB820's side-line in video-on-demand.

Familiar face

Out of the box and powered up, the deck operates just like its cheaper sibling [reviewed in *HCC* #291]. It has the same familiar menus and features as the DP-UB420, including network services and streaming portal features. There, in addition to Netflix, you'll find Amazon Prime Video, Berlin Philharmoniker, BBC News/Sports and YouTube. The portal does look rather dated, but the





Netflix app supports Dolby Vision and Dolby Atmos, which is a welcome touch.

Other niceties include promised support for Amazon Alexa and Google Assistant. Once enabled you'll be able to use voice to fast forward or pause movies. It's difficult to gauge how much value this brings to the user experience; after all, the dumpy remote does exactly the same without the need for verbosity.

Despite that analogue output, this player doesn't have the high-end audio aspirations of the £850 DP-UB9000. Sonically, its performance is more a mirror of the cheaper UB420. There's no universal music disc support, so don't expect to play any SACD or DVD-Audio discs you have stored away, but it does a functional – if not inspiring – job with CD, and boasts 24-bit hi-res audio and DSD file support.

HCC appeal

Anticipation that the DP-UB820 delivers on the picture front is quickly rewarded. The deck uses the same impressive second-generation HXC image processor as its stablemates, and does a commendable job with both Ultra HD platters and regular Blu-rays. UHD discs are upscaled to 4:4:4 colour sub-sampling.

The player also sports the brand's HDR Optimiser technology. Accessed via the HDR Setting on the remote control, this offers options for a variety of viewing situations: Standard, Bright Environment, Natural Environment and Light Environment.

The Optimiser lifts brightness and contrast without washing out an image. It effectively adds an extra level of pop, which makes HDR easier to watch in a brighter viewing room, but also makes the image jump in a light controlled environment too. *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (Ultra HD Blu-ray) looks ravishing with the tweak in play. The boost brings more ping to the picture.

For example, when Lockdown rises ominously from the swamp, as the Cemetery Wind strike force take down Ratchet, texture and detail becomes easier to spot in its dark, wet armour. The resulting firefight dazzles in just the right way (the scene is tailor-made to show off an OLED

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes **ULTRA HD:** Yes **HDR:** Yes. HDR10; HDR10+; Dolby Vision **UPSCALING:** Yes. To 2160p **MULTIREGION:** No. Region B BD/R2 DVD **HDMI:** Yes. 2 x outputs (1 x v2.0; 1 x v1.4) **MULTICHANNEL ANALOGUE:** Yes. 7.1 output **DIGITAL AUDIO:** Yes. Optical digital audio output **ETHERNET:** Yes **BUILT IN WI-FI:** Yes **SACD/DVD-A:** No/No **DIMENSIONS:** 430(w) x 62(h) x 204(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 2.2kg

FEATURES: 2 x USB ports; smart portal access; DLNA media playback with support for FLAC, WAV, ALAC, DSD, WMA, AAC, MP3 and AIFF audio; second-gen HXC image processor; SDR to HDR conversion; HLG to HDR10 conversion; HDR Optimiser adjustment

PARTNER WITH



LG OLED55B8: One of the most affordable ways to upgrade your display to Dolby Vision, this 55in 2018-era LG OLED now sells for around £1,200. A less powerful processor is used versus the E8 and C8 models, but image quality still beguiles.

panel). There's no doubting the deck's powerhouse processing chops.

Dolby Vision tends to offer slightly better precision in terms of HDR definition and colour handling, and this is evidenced by the sheer, smooth vibrancy of the DV-encoded *Despicable Me 2* (Ultra HD Blu-ray).

While the player supports multi HDR formats, it doesn't offer all the refinements that make the DP-UB9000 [see HCC #292] so interesting. An obvious omission is that there's no Max FALL/Max CLL playback information, so you can't use the player to lift the veil on UHD disc mastering data. Spin a platter and you get the standard display options.

Room for one more?

The DP-UB820 faces tough competition from Panasonic's own low-priced, over achieving DP-UB420. However, if you need to add Dolby Vision disc playback to your system, without breaking the bank, the price premium will be worth the outlay, even if that 7.1 analogue output will remain redundant. Of course, if Dolby Vision isn't required then the step up from its budget brother is far more difficult to justify.

While it's not exactly a tunesmith, the AV performance is fine for the price. The deck elicits detail and smooth gradations from discs, and its bitstream audio performance will serve any Atmos home theatre well ■

1. The front panel drops down to reveal the player's disc tray

2. Panasonic's stubby IR remote control feels a little basic

3. The UB820's analogue audio output supports 7.1

HCC VERDICT



Panasonic DP-UB820

→ £350 → www.panasonic.co.uk

WE SAY: Highlights here are broad HDR support and an excellent image performance with user tweaks. The basic remote and user interface, plus average CD playback, take the shine off.





Amazon delivers with HDR streamer

The retail/media giant has retooled its Fire TV Stick, adopting a more is more approach to AV formats. **Steve May** reckons it's red-hot

LET'S NOT BUFFER. Amazon's latest HDMI streaming stick is an absolute stonker.

This upgraded dongle is noticeably longer than the previous Fire TV Stick, but with multi-HDR support (not only does the device handle HDR10 and its dynamic variant HDR10+, it's also Dolby Vision compatible), Alexa voice control and dual-band, dual-antenna MIMO Wi-Fi reception, it packs a heck of a lot into its matt black shell. Available for the bargain price of £50, it's hard to find a reason not to buy one.

Before you ask, adding this Amazon streamer to your 4K TV will not magically bequeath HDR10+ or Dolby Vision compliance. It's merely a conduit for those metadata encoded streams. You'll still require a telly that's compatible with one or the other.

Of course, the reality is that the relevant client apps, be they Netflix on a Dolby Vision-enabled screen, or Amazon on a HDR10+ panel, will already have the ability to deliver the same service. The value is that you don't have to fire up separate applications, allowing you to stay within the Amazon Fire UI environment. This is clearly more convenient than switching between multiple interfaces.

When it comes to audio, the stick supports Dolby Digital Plus, which delivers both Dolby Digital 5.1/7.1 and Dolby Atmos streams where available.

While there's no room for a dedicated Ethernet connection, you can always pick up a third-party USB power cord with a break-out Ethernet port to hardwire. The stick automatically detects a such cable connection during setup.

Plug, then play

Installing the Fire TV Stick 4K is fast and painless, taking just a few minutes. For this audition, I plugged it into the back of an AV receiver. The housing is too wide to fit a standard HDMI input board, but thoughtfully Amazon supplies an extender which gets around the problem. This short lead may also prove useful if you're connecting directly to a screen, as the device will likely stick out past the edge of a bezel on smaller sets with side-mounted ports.

Driving the Fire TV Stick 4K is a quad-core 1.7GHz processor, which delivers quicker load times, and seemingly faster stream optimisation, than previous generations. It's also powerful enough for quite polished

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
4K HDR/Atmos-enabled HDMI media streamer

POSITION:
Amazon's premium media player option

PEERS:
Roku Streaming Stick+;
Apple TV 4K

gaming, as evidenced by the Sega classic collection now available through Amazon.

Dolby Atmos is available out of the box from the Amazon Prime streaming service. This currently only has a few shows in the format, most notably the action series *Jack Ryan*. Atmos isn't a new innovation, we've had it on the previous generations of Fire TV, but it's always reassuring to see an AVR recognise the stream.

'This update to Amazon's slim player is irresistible, combining content choice with powerful hardware'

Nearly all the key VOD services are onboard – BBC iPlayer, ITV Hub, All4, My5 and UK Play, as well as OTT heavy hitters like Netflix and Disney. But there's no quick-start YouTube app, so to access this you'll need to go via a web browser – the stick offers Firefox and Amazon Silk. Local file playback can be handled by Plex and VLC.

Fire TV isn't just about TV either, there's a variety of audio apps, including Amazon Music, Spotify, Tidal and TuneIn.

Image quality is excellent from both Amazon Prime and Netflix. The player quickly locks onto the fastest adaptive stream, and if your broadband connection is quick enough, provides a stable, buffer-free picture. Programmes snap into high-clarity with remarkable speed. Fine detail, colour vibrancy and dynamics are first-class.

While it's tempting to focus on the clarity of 4K content – *Better Call Saul* on Netflix is a UHD standout – the majority of viewing is likely to remain HD, and this gadget streams detailed 1080p images on even relatively slow connections. The sense of cinematic texture evident in *Outlander* (Amazon Prime) is totally engaging.

Audio gets a Plus

Audio quality is equally fine. The ultra-high efficiency of Dolby Digital Plus negates concerns about the smaller bandwidth used for Dolby Atmos when compared to Atmos delivered within TrueHD; the soundstage is wide and high. In truth, *Jack Ryan* doesn't do much to exploit the height aspects of the Atmos platform, but there's no doubting the frisson it generates.

The stick has no problem with standard surround sound, offering sprightly panning around the soundstage and generally big audio – allow your Dolby Atmos AV receiver to add post-processing in its Dolby Surround mode for the best results. This diminutive device is also perfectly adequate acting as a two-channel source for music.

SPECIFICATIONS

CONNECTIONS: Integrated HDMI; USB power **KEY APPS:** Amazon Prime Video; Netflix; BBC iPlayer; ITV Hub; All4; My5; UKTV Play; BBC News; BBC Sport; BT TV; Disney Life; Curzon Cinema; Crunchyroll; UFC **AUDIO FORMAT SUPPORT:** Dolby Digital Plus (to 7.1 and Dolby Atmos); FLAC; MP3; PCM/Wave; Vorbis **VIDEO FORMAT SUPPORT:** HEVC; MPEG **DIMENSIONS:** 108(h) x 30(w) x 14(d)mm (including connector) **WEIGHT:** 53.6g

FEATURES: Amazon Alexa voice control; smart home integration; Bluetooth; 8GB internal storage; VoiceView screen reader; quad core 1.7GHz processor; Fire OS 6; Silk and Firefox web browsers

PARTNER WITH



AMAZON PRIME: Pay your sub to Amazon (£79 per year or £7.99 per month) to unlock access to Amazon Prime Video content (although some material is still pay-per-view). Prime also adds music streaming and free delivery on some Amazon purchases



The application of voice control is actually crucial, not least because the organisation of Amazon Prime in particular is almost wilfully obtuse. Search terms (movie titles, stars, genres and so on) were all reliably understood. If there is a caveat, it's that not all avenues are included in searches. UK catch-up platforms are currently out, but Netflix is in.

The Fire TV Stick 4K can also be paired with an Echo device, for zapper-free Alexa control, if both are on the same network. This lets you instruct the streamer directly, for example, by declaring: 'Alexa, watch *Lucifer* on Fire TV.' The provision of Bluetooth is another bonus. Not only can you stream from a mobile device, you can Bluetooth back to wireless headphones for private listening – great for late-night binge sessions.

1. Voice search proves very useful for unearthing content within Amazon Prime

2. A side-mounted USB input gives the Fire TV Stick 4K its power

Essential purchase

This update to Amazon's slim player is nigh on irresistible, combining huge content choice with extremely powerful hardware. The inclusion of Dolby Vision and HDR10+ has appeal, but Dolby Atmos support is potentially the most useful within a home cinema environment – we eagerly await the provision of Atmos within the stick's Netflix app. If you love to stream, this is an essential purchase ■

HCC VERDICT



Amazon Fire TV Stick 4K

→ £50 → www.amazon.co.uk

WE SAY: The most powerful 4K HDR streamer you can buy. A superb performer, with integrated voice control and huge content support. A home cinema must-have.



The inbetweener

Jamie Carter auditions an Optoma PJ that mixes 4K HDR playback with voice control and app integration



Add a projector to your breakfast routine...

IF YOU'VE BEEN paying any attention to the tech world over the past few years, you'll have noticed the rise of Amazon's Alexa, and when it comes to AV, shouting into thin air is replacing fumbling with a remote control. Optoma's UHL55 projector is Alexa-ready, meaning that – when combined with an Echo device with the Optoma SmartProjection skill enabled – you can say things like 'Alexa, increase volume on movie room' (having set 'movie room' as the name for the UHL55.), or ask it to switch inputs, change image modes and more.

As well as this unusual feature, the 4K HDR UHL55 has a few other strings to its bow, including an LED light source that's rated at 30,000 hours and 2,000 Lumens, and a built-in Bluetooth speaker for smart device connection that works even when the PJ is

switched off. Wi-Fi and Android OS integration also introduces media playing software that handles 4K MP4 videos from a USB stick, as well as content via apps including Netflix, YouTube, BBC iPlayer and Spotify. Weighing 3.8kg and measuring

220mm x 220mm x 135mm, the UHL55 is made to be moved. In an impressive design flourish, removing the lens cap switches on the product, and placement is easy enough. From a few metres away from a screen, an 80in image is possible – the throw ratio is fixed at 1.2:1 as there's no zoom.

Autofocus doesn't always work effectively, although it's easy enough to do using Optoma's tiny Bluetooth remote control. Not that the remote particularly impresses, being unresponsive and slow. Maybe it's made that way to encourage use of Alexa...

The UHL55 is well connected in far more ways than voice. It's equipped with a brace of HDMI 2.0 inputs and an optical audio output, and can decode Dolby Digital 5.1 soundtracks to send to an AV receiver via optical.

Voice control worked flawlessly in my test, and felt a natural way of interaction. I was also surprised by the PJ's secondary role as a

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes **4K:** Yes. 3,480 x 2,160 **HDR:** Yes. HDR10 **CONNECTIONS:** 2 x HDMI inputs; USB 2.0; USB 3.0; Ethernet; optical digital audio output; headphone jack **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** 2,000 Lumens **CONTRAST (CLAIMED):** 25,000:1 **zoom:** No **DIMENSIONS:** 220(w) x 135(h) x 220(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 3.8kg

FEATURES: Amazon Alexa or Google Assistant voice control; Android TV apps; Wi-Fi; Bluetooth (acts as a Bluetooth speaker); PureMotion frame interpolation; HDCP 2.2 support; Dolby Digital 5.1 decoding

standalone Bluetooth speaker. Once put into its dedicated Bluetooth mode, it can take audio streams from a 'phone and play them via its 8W stereo speaker array, exhibiting a well-balanced (although not super-loud) performance.

Judged on picture quality, the UHL55 is a mixed bag. Colour and detail from *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (4K Blu-ray) are always eye-catching, but both black levels and shadow detail never reach beyond average.

Optoma's frame interpolation tech (PureMotion) isn't generally needed, but it did help remove a touch of blur when Han, Chewbacca and Tobias Beckett do battle atop a moving train on *Vandor* to capture its cargo of coaxium. Despite the PJ's living room-friendly ethos, there's plenty of calibration potential, including gamma and colour management. It's also Full HD 3D capable.

Giving voice to projection

Manufacturers are putting voice control on products that have been happily voice-less for years for one simple reason: they think users would rather have an invisible, hands-free interface than a piece of hardware. They're probably right, and on the UHL55, Alexa voice commands work well, provided you can stomach the rather long-winded setup process. However, the UHL55 doesn't prove quite smart enough to do away with a remote entirely, and unfortunately the zapper that is supplied is very poor – let's hope downgraded remotes don't become a feature in this inbetween era.

4K plays well on the UHL55, and I love the overall design, but the price tag here is high for something that's not quite as cutting-edge as it wants to be ■

AV INFO

PRODUCT: 4K DLP projector with Wi-Fi/Bluetooth skills

POSITION: Part of Optoma's varied 4K DLP PJ range

PEERS: LG CineBeam HU85L; XGIMI H2 LED

HCC VERDICT



Optoma UHL55

→ £1,500 → www.optoma.co.uk

WE SAY: Great use of voice control and apps in a tempting form factor, but this 4K compact is expensive for an occasional-use product.

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Digital Copy

A format war becomes interesting when both sides start fighting, so **Mark Craven** is now paying attention to Dolby Vision vs HDR10+. But he's more interested in *The Equalizer 2*'s BBFC rating...

THE BRILLIANCE OF home cinema is being able to pop a bag of popcorn, kick back on your sofa and enjoy a movie in comfort and quality without having to get properly dressed. What's not so great about being a member of the AV brigade is having to reassign HDMI options in a deep sub-menu, pore through a 200-page AV receiver manual, or worry about format developments. Yet sometimes the technical side seems to dominate the conversation, rather than, y'know, the actual movie stuff. I've spent hours talking frame interpolation with Team HCC member John Archer – I don't even know what his favourite film is.

And like (I suspect) many of you, I've become the go-to guy among friends when they're thinking of buying a new TV/soundbar/anything with a plug. Thankfully, most of them are only shopping in the budget aisles and their questions are easily answered. But I'm dreading the moment when someone asks me about Dolby Vision and HDR10+.

At first, **this HDR schism looked like being the most pointless and unconvincing of format wars.**

Of the two sides, one didn't even really exist for a while; HDR10+ spent most of last year firing a flare gun, rather than an actual gun. Dolby Vision therefore had the battlefield all to itself, only its troops were disorganised and not as numerous as it would have liked.

But in 2019 we have what appears to be a *bona fide* scrap, so it's only natural to wonder which will be the winner. And... I dunno.

Summer last year I would have said that Dolby Vision was the horse to back. Players were available, discs were available and LG and Sony displays were ready to rock. Now, however, HDR10+ has moved into the physical media arena, Oppo and Pioneer

have shown support can be added to existing Blu-ray chipsets, and Panasonic, Philips and Samsung TVs are waiting in the wings. And Disney has gone quiet on Dolby Vision...

The irritating/good thing (depending on your point of view) is that both formats could fail and it wouldn't really matter, as both seek to improve on something (HDR10) which I'd imagine 99 per cent of people are happy with already. I'm not suggesting the AV industry shouldn't strive for better quality, but when the situation boils down to affecting not only the discs and player you buy, but the TV you can choose (and offers nothing for home cinema projector enthusiasts), it just becomes another shoulder-shrugging moment.

Age concern

While I'm here – a quick moan about *The Equalizer 2* (pictured) on Ultra HD Blu-ray, which I reviewed in our last issue. Not the film itself (it's fun), nor the quality of the disc (it's great), but the issue around its BBFC certification. Pick up Sony Pictures' release and you'll see it flaunting an 18 rating. Open the case and you'll find both discs are certified 15 by the BBFC. Head over to the BBFC website, which is normally a great and trustworthy source of information, and it'll tell you it's the Vengeance Mode (found on the 1080p Blu-ray) that earns the release an 18 sticker. Watch the Vengeance Mode and you'll discover this is actually a less violent cut than the presentation on the 4K disc. I don't know what's gone on here (either the BBFC has made a mistake or Sony has slipped out an unrated version of the movie without telling anyone) but it's enough to make me wish I had Robert McCall's phone number ■

Have you bought a TV based on HDR10+ or Dolby Vision support? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

In exchange for telling friends what TV to buy, **Mark Craven's** friends tell him he must get dressed properly before he leaves the house





Point of View

Richard Stevenson enters 2019 extolling a new-found policy of anti-extremism when it comes to home cinema. It probably won't last...

IT APPEARS MY three decades of pursuing a profligate philosophy of home cinema hardware excess might have been misplaced. A cathartic rebuild of the cinema room is starting to make me think that less might actually be more. Sometimes.

Looking back, I could have won awards for AV kit buying and probably kept several manufacturers afloat. The 1990s saw my inaugural entry into the school of home cinema extremism with a surround sound 'array'. A long, narrow room with a rear-pro TV at one end meant the rear channels (just two, remember that...) struggled to create convincing surround effects. I tried dipoles and bipoles and had a tri-curious phase too. Yet, it just didn't sound the same as the local cinema, which used multiple rear channel speakers along the side walls... Ah-ha!

I purchased eight mid-sized bookshelf speakers and mounted four along each side wall from just in front of the sofa to the back of the room. Creative wiring, with two series-wired pairs of speakers run in parallel, meant a sensible amplifier load from a single channel of the AVR. Several miles of white trunking stuck on the wall to hide the convoluted wiring loom later, and I had created an audio monster. Immersive, powerful and definitely surrounding.

The noughties and a different house witnessed serious low-frequency folly. Dolby's spec for cinema speakers suggested they should be capable of 20Hz-20kHz, yet few models get close to that sort of low. The solution was a subwoofer for each of the main seven channels. The high-level input on REL's model meant I could link one with each channel by connecting to the speaker terminals and manually dialling in the crossover and gain balance for each.

The bass madness didn't stop there though. One woofer for LFE was creating annoying room nodes that seemed fixated on the listening position, despite

placement tweaks. Two subs at the front, plus a smaller one at the back of the room to disrupt standing waves, was suggested. It worked, and my ten-subwoofer system was born.

It was as practical as a chocolate teapot, of course. You could hardly move in the room for black boxes and the system had a narrow range of SPLs at which it was perfectly balanced. As that range was somewhere between ASBO and WMD, **ten subs caused me more domestic strife than any AV update before or since.**

A decade on and a foray into audiophile tinkering got me thinking about power amps. Multichannel amps worked well but if bi-amping and monoblocks could improve two-channel hi-fi systems, why not AV? The system peaked at seven stereo amplifiers and two multichannel units for my Atmos and front effects speakers. Every channel was bi-amped, once I found a company that offered discounts for speaker cable quantities over a kilometre.

Back to basics

Late last year saw a cinema room strip-down for a 2019 rebuild. Over 15 years of reviews and equipment changes gave it the ambience of a ram-raid and the walls were starting to look like surrealist art via power drill. Only an AVR, woofer, projector and small speaker package remain onsite, so I can continue to watch movies around the refit.

It's working well too. It's simple and uncluttered. It doesn't take a wiring diagram and fourteen remote controls to prep for a film and sounds pretty good at any volume level. Could simplicity and stripping things bare be the way ahead for the rebuilt cinema room in 2019? Maybe. I'll keep you posted ■

*Have you ever trimmed down your AV system?
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As well as enjoying uncomplicated movie and music playback, **Richard Stevenson** is also looking forward to a significantly lower electricity bill





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In The Mix

With UK shoppers seeking out 'experiences', **Jon Thompson** wonders if that accounts for HMV's recent woes. Maybe luxury barbers, rather than streaming media, are to blame?

POST-CHRISTMAS BLUES SEEM to be hitting the high street again. Home entertainment retailer HMV has gone into administration, six years since it was last rescued from the point of collapse by Hilco Capital. Poor trading over the Christmas period and pre-Brexit consumer nerves are being blamed.

When it (almost) went under in 2012 it was easy to see that shopping at HMV was more expensive than using online operations like Amazon. But at the moment HMV is actually cheaper than Amazon on many things. So, is it that people are now just too lazy in the UK to go to an actual store?

Perhaps. I recently bought *Christopher Robin* and *They Shall Not Grow Old* on Blu-ray. The cost was £29.98 from Amazon, with free delivery via my Prime membership (£79 per year). If I had walked into HMV, I could have bought both in a 2 for £25 deal. And if I had ordered it online from HMV's website, I could have got it for the same price of £25, with free delivery at no cost for orders over £10. I should have paid more attention.

The blame game

So, what went wrong? Doom-sayers immediately blamed the rise of online streaming again, which is silly. The music migration had already happened in 2012, and by 2018 physical media sales were steady and growing and worth £2bn, so it's not this that is the flaw in HMV's business model.

As I've said previously, what streaming hit was the rental movie sector, causing the demise of Blockbuster etc. As for music, it did have an effect, but not in the way many think: it actually encouraged people to buy physical media. And it's the same for video disc sales – free-to-air TV series sell by the truckload on disc. You can watch for free, but people still buy regardless. Why? Fans like to own something.

A more likely cause is the swing of business from record shops to supermarkets, which now have around 30 per cent of all album sales. This hurt HMV more than streaming and Amazon. Sainsbury's, for example, has its own vinyl range and label.

If anything, streaming services are about to plateau, and in some respects are declining. The Netflix all-you-can-eat model is ultimately doomed to fail. You can't have growth for growth's sake. It will have to keep raising its subscription price or drastically change its approach. In the end, it will become more like a traditional Hollywood studio operation, while studios move in the direction of Netflix. At some point, they will meet in the middle and we'll witness a new business model.

Another trend is people spending on 'experiences', getting the best premium for their money they can. **Tattoos, coffee and luxury barbers are growth areas in retail – all things that can't be bought online.**

Cinema, too, is seeing growth at the premium end.

Going into an Apple store is an experience. Shopping in HMV is not. Its pile 'em high approach is somewhat off-putting.

And HMV faces the same issue as all high street shops – business rates. In the AV world, we have seen so many bedrocks of this industry shutter for this simple fact. Maplin suffered the same fate. The cost of retail space coupled with onerous business rates leads to empty shops. There are ex-Maplin stores in London still vacant with no sign of being re-let.

At the time of writing, HMV's administrator is letting the business trade as normal while a solution is sought. I hope it's successful, and can come back stronger. In the meantime, I'm off for a shave... ■

*How much do you spend on Blu-rays each month?
Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com*

When he's not in his screening room, **Jon Thompson** tweets about Hollywood gossip, movie-making and digital mastering at @johnnyfocal



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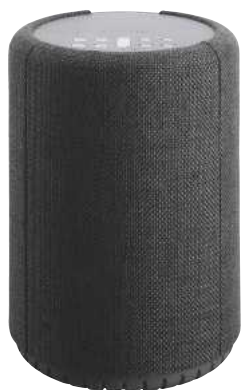
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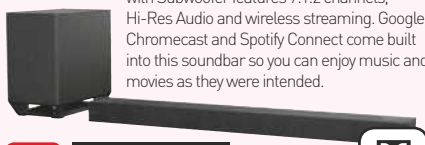
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Feedback

Got an axe to grind? Need to comment on current tech? Want to share your knowledge with our readers? **Team HCC** is here to help

Bothered by banding

I'm hoping you can help me with a problem on my Panasonic LCD TV (65in DX750), which is driving me absolutely mad. When we are watching a film, whether it's from a Blu-ray or Sky, whenever there is a dark scene (e.g. night time or deep water) and there is a bright light source, there are concentric circles of grey emanating from the light source getting darker towards the black.

This was particularly evident and annoying during the underwater scenes in *The Shape of Water*.

I'd be grateful if you could tell me what's causing this and if it is correctable by altering something in the TV's settings.

And last but not least, I bought some 3D glasses off eBay which were supposed to be compatible with my Panasonic TV but I've never been able to make them work. I'm fed up with messing about with it now so can you tell me exactly which glasses would work with my flatscreen?

By the way, I think the whole 3D experience is wonderful. The most incredible 3D performance I've ever seen was *Dr Strange* at the local IMAX. That was breathtaking. Long live 3D!

Terry Wells



Dr Strange: an 'incredible' 3D experience

Jon Thompson replies: The issue you're describing with your Panasonic TV sounds like 'banding', and is quite common. Without going into technical detail about bit-depth and greyscale steps, it's caused by your TV's panel struggling to accurately display subtle shifts in tone, meaning bright lights in things like water don't have a smooth graduation from one tone to another. What you get instead appears as a step or a band.

Banding issues will never go away completely with today's home delivery

systems, and image compression used to encode video can exasperate this issue. However, settings in your system may also add to the problem, so some fine-tuning could minimise its effects.

An issue with most LCD TV display tech is that you need to sit directly on axis to the screen – you only need to be slightly off and banding issues will be magnified. Having the TV's backlight too bright can also impact it.

There are things you can check with your BD player and TV. Your Panasonic has HDMI

VFX masterclass

I enjoyed the Movie Awards in the last issue [HCC #294] but was surprised to see *Paddington 2* winning 'Best Visual FX'. The CG work here is excellent but only a small part of the film. Both *Blade Runner 2049* and *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* (which were in the nominated section) would be more worthy winners in my opinion. Perhaps it's a case that the SFX in these blockbuster movies is now so good that we don't really notice it any more, while *Paddington*'s is more obvious? Jason Hendry

Mark Craven replies: There's no denying the brilliance of both *Blade Runner 2049* and *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom*'s FX, and you're right that *Paddington 2*'s are more obvious as it's the title character that has been CG'd. What can we say? We just love bears.



That dinosaur isn't real, y'know

settings (Picture, Option Settings, HDMI RGB Range) – make sure these are set to Normal or Auto rather than Full. The latter sounds like it might give you something more, but it is actually computer graphics range, and for watching video will give you a milky picture. Also tweak your Blu-ray player settings to output other formats, such as RGB or 4:2:2 or 4:4:4, to see if that reduces the effect.

As for 3D glasses, I'm not sure what you purchased off eBay, but Panasonic Support says the TV is compatible with its TY-ER3D4ME, TY-ER3D4SE, TY-ER3D5ME and TY-ER3D6ME 3D eyewear – so get these spex.

Speaker conundrum

Hi there, I'd like your advice regarding my current setup and upgrade ideas.

Over the last 12 years I've had a couple of setups, my first – back in 2002 – was a one-box solution that whetted my interest. Then in 2006 I upgraded to a system consisting of a Pioneer PDP-428XD plasma, an Onkyo TX-SR875 receiver (which has since been sold), a Pioneer BD player (ditto), and a Monitor Audio Silver 5.1 speaker set. The Pioneer plasma is still going strong and looking great.

I love my home cinema system but due to life changes (marriage) I've had to tailor my setup to suit the room and my wife – like many others I guess. Today I have a budget AVR (Pioneer VSX-923), and my speakers are the Tannoy Arena line in a 7.2 configuration. I've recently purchased another seven Tannoy Arena speakers and wall fittings for a cracking price on eBay, and plan to use maybe four of these as heights/Atmos. Yet my only option for position is up high on the walls near the corners of the room angled in and down (not ideal but the best I can do). My room is wider than long and my seating is up against the back wall, so my surrounds are slightly in front of my listening position on the side walls angled in, and my rear surrounds are in the back corners. I now want to add four heights – where best would be to place these considering ceiling-mounting isn't viable?

Also what AV receivers would suite my Tannoy Arena speakers, as I love the sound of these. I like the look of the Denon AVR-X4500H and AVR-X6500H. I know with the X4500H I'd need an extra two-channel amp. I do have a Denon two-channel model from years ago so that's a possibility, but the X6500H would be the better route I think. I also love the idea of a NAD T 758 or T 777. With these I would definitely need extra power amps but from a sound point of view they're great. I listen to as much music through my system as watch movies, still incorporating all the speakers.
Dan

Richard Stevenson replies: We'd always try to create a little space behind the sofa if possible, just to ensure the rear surrounds are

★ Star Letter...

My daughter loves DVD!

Hi HCC. I read with interest Anton van Beek's column [#293] in which he talks about the recent headlines of how streaming has killed the beloved DVD player. While I would agree that I too find streaming to be a more convenient and simpler way of experiencing movie and TV entertainment, I'm pleased to report that DVDs are actually making something of a resurgence – in our front room at least.

Our daughter is now at an age (7) where she has taken an interest in films and likes us to sit as a family for 'Movie Night' on a weekend, complete with occasional popcorn or a pick-and-mix. But what to watch? This is where the now-expanding storage box of DVDs is opened, and she gleefully roots through all the cases and chooses what we'll be watching (*Paddington Bear* being a perennial favourite, and the *Nativity* trilogy [pictured below] now getting mass plays in the run up to Christmas).

While she will utilise on-demand players for cartoons and factual programmes courtesy of iPlayer and Netflix, when it comes to films they simply don't get a look-in. She enjoys the act of looking at the DVD covers, choosing the film and putting the disc in the player. Young or old, it seems you just can't beat the tangible qualities of physical media; reminds me of the days of my own youth when I would be excited at the prospect of our weekly visits to the



'video shop' with my dad to rent a new action film!

Until the studios start pumping family Blu-rays on to the shelves at B&M (and other stores), like they do with DVDs, I'm happy to say that DVD will still be a firm favourite in the Owen Household. The picture quality is still plenty good enough for casual viewing and the price is cheap enough to make them an acceptable impulse buy when at Asda too.

Three cheers for DVD!

Paul Owen

Anton van Beek replies: You haven't mentioned whether you are watching these DVDs on an actual DVD-only player, Paul, or whether it's a Blu-ray deck you have – it was John Lewis' decision to stop selling DVD spinners that kickstarted my column. Although, as you're an HCC reader, I'll assume your system is Blu-ray capable...

You've certainly hit the nail on the head about the continued popularity of DVD software – it's widely available in retailers where Blu-ray often isn't, and it's bargain-priced. I'm not sure anyone would consider paying out for a BD copy of *Nativity 3: Dude, Where's My Donkey?*

Anyway, you've won yourself a Blu-ray. Maybe don't let your daughter watch this one.

Star letter-writer Paul grabs the brilliant *A Simple Favour* on Blu-ray. Directed by Paul Feig, and starring Anna Kendrick and Blake Lively, this stylish and blackly comic thriller tells the story of a single mother who seeks to unearth the truth about the sudden disappearance of her best friend. *A Simple Favour* is available to own now on digital download, DVD, Blu-ray™ and 4K Ultra HD Blu-ray™, courtesy of Lionsgate Home Entertainment UK.

truly aft of the listening position. Bringing them closer together on the wall would then really open up the rear soundstage.

Atmos speakers angled down from the rear corners should work as your AVR's EQ will tame the position's low-frequency boundary gain. However, it might be best to position the other two angled-in Atmos speakers around halfway between sofa and screen to keep all the Atmos channels 'overhead'. In fact, a 7.2.2 nine-channel setup may be a better bet, using just two Atmos speakers in the mid-room position, and keeping the rear half uncluttered. Sticking to nine channels opens up some more cost-effective AVR options too – you could use your existing Denon stereo amp with a

seven-channel model if it has the requisite processing and pre-outs.

If you do go 7.2.4, rest assured modern EQ systems like Audyssey (on the Denons) and Dirac (on the NAD T 777 V3) will go a fair way to sorting out even a dog's dinner of speaker positioning, particularly when playing object-based formats like Dolby Atmos and DTS:X ■

Contact us...

Write to HCC, AV Tech Media Ltd, Suite 25, Eden House, Enterprise Way, Edenbridge, Kent, TN8 6HF, or email us at letters@homecinemachoice.com
Please note: we cannot guarantee to print/answer all the letters we receive. Sorry.

WIN! Great Blu-rays up for grabs...

Head over to www.homecinemachoice.com/competitions to be in with a chance to win

Doctor Who: The Complete Eleventh Series

Fresh from breaking ratings records on TV, Jodie Whittaker's first series as the Thirteenth Doctor is now available to own on DVD, Blu-ray and Amazon-exclusive Steelbook. Thanks to BBC Studios we have three copies of the *Doctor Who: The Complete Eleventh Series* Blu-ray up for grabs. To be in with the chance of winning one, answer the following correctly...

Question:

Jodie Whittaker played a grieving mother in which acclaimed UK crime series?

Answer:

- A) *Broadchurch*
- B) *Happy Valley*
- C) *The Fall*



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Venom

Having cleaned up at the box office last year, comic book blockbuster *Venom* makes its Digital debut on January 26, with the 4K Ultra HD™, Blu-ray™

and DVD following on February 4.

To mark the release we have teamed up with Sony Pictures Home Entertainment and have five *Venom* BDs to be won!

Question:

Which famous Tom plays Venom's human host, Eddie Brock, in the film?

Answer:

- A) Tom Hanks
- B) Tom Hardy
- C) Tom Hiddleston



Indicator bundle

Fan favourite label Indicator kicked off 2019 by bringing four more classics – Dennis Hopper's *The Last Movie*, Francis Ford Coppola's *Gardens of Stone*, Charles Bronson thriller *Breakout* and Stanley Kramer's *R.P.M.* – to Blu-ray. To celebrate, we have one set of these four limited edition Blu-rays to give away to a lucky reader.

Question:

Dennis Hopper played a photojournalist in which classic Francis Ford Coppola film?

Answer:

- A) *The Conversation*
- B) *Apocalypse Now*
- C) *One from the Heart*



Human Desire

Filmmaker Fritz Lang was reunited with Glenn Ford and Gloria Grahame from the previous year's *The Big Heat* for this hard-edged 1954 film noir, which makes

its long-awaited Blu-ray debut on February 11, courtesy of Eureka Entertainment and The Masters of Cinema Series. To mark the release we have five copies up for grabs!

Question:

Human Desire is based on the novel *La Bête humaine* by which French author?

Answer:

- A) Émile Zola
- B) Victor Hugo
- C) Alexandre Dumas

To enter any of the above competitions go to www.homecinemachoice.com/competitions

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Certified: AV-Holic!

HCC reader **Stefan** invites you to tour his self-built basement AV den, where ten years of hard work and system refinement is reaping rewards



The room offers 3.1m 4K HDR visuals and 7.2.4 audio

Welcome to the AV-Holic Hall of Fame! Introduce yourself...

My name is Stefan, and I am from Germany. I am member of a regional home cinema club (HDRGB – Homecinema Dreams ReGensBurg), which does a 'tour' each year to various regions in (so far) Germany and Austria, visiting other home cinema owners and their movie rooms. We'd love to come to the UK – check out our website www.hdr gb.de/touren/touren.htm.

How long have you been into home cinema, and what was the first setup you had?

My first setup must have been in 2001 or 2002, with a Sony VPL-HS1 projector in our living room, combined with a Bose Acoustimass 5 Series speaker system, Sony DVD player and a Technics AV receiver which already featured

DTS – unfortunately I don't remember the model numbers anymore!

Later the projector changed to a Panasonic PT-AE700, but still all in our living room, projecting on to a mobile screen – it was 180cm wide, in a kind of suitcase that was easy to hide behind the sofa when not in use.

When did you decide to set up your current cinema room?

When we started planning the layout of our own house in 2006 we already planned a separate room in the 4m x 5m basement, ensuring it was built to a regular room height (2.5m) so we could have a second seating row on a raised platform.

Of course our architect didn't believe a single word when we told her to name that one room 'cinema' – at least until one evening when we had the screen already set up and

not hidden. We could literally see her jaw drop, probably thinking: 'Damn, they are serious about this.'

Originally the plan was to simply take our existing AV system and set this up down there only with two rows of seating, but luckily the first year after we moved in we had to do many other things around the house and garden, and so I had plenty of time to browse through internet forums and see so many other nice cinema rooms. Quickly the idea came to 'do it right', and I started planning the room first in my mind and then using CorelDRAW software.

Around January 2008 my wife and I started building the room, with a lot of help from our then nine-year-old daughter, and last but not least my father, who helped cutting wood parts for the platform under the second seating row.



With the exception of plastering and fitting the air-conditioning unit, Stefan (and family) tackled the cinema build themselves



A raised platform was constructed to elevate the second seating row, and rear corners fitted with disc and hardware storage



With chairs in place, Stefan takes a well-earned rest – these seats would eventually be replaced by more luxurious recliners

Overall it took us about one year, until January 2009, when we screened our first movie, *Wanted*, on I think four Saturdays in a row, because we wanted to show off the result to all our friends and the eight seats we had back then were simply not enough.

The hardware at that time was a Teufel System 6 THX speaker array (7.1), Panasonic Blu-ray player, Pioneer SC-LX50 receiver and Panasonic PT-AE2000 beamer.

Did you get help from professionals to do the build?

Just for installing the A/C system and

plastering the walls and the ceiling – basically because I simply don't have the tools for this.

What's in your system now?

I made the projector screen myself. It's 3.1m wide, 21:9 ratio using acoustically transparent material, with manual masking for 2.40:1, 2:1; 1.85:1 and 1.78:1 ratios. My projector now is a Sony VPL-VW550ES 4K HDR model.

The receiver is a nine-channel Pioneer SC-LX89, used with active Genelec 1032B speakers (front channels), four Teufel System 6 M620Ds (surrounds), four Sonance VP66R

TLs for the Atmos/DTS:X ceiling speakers, and two SVS SB13-Ultra subwoofers, in a 7.2.4 setup.

For movies and TV I have an Oppo UDP-203 4K Blu-ray player, Mede8er 600 (for streaming), an Apple TV 4K and a Technisat TechniStar S1 satellite receiver.

I control the system with a Logitech Harmony 895 remote. I also have LG Art Cool Harmony air-conditioning, and Vicoustic acoustic optimisation to tackle side-wall and ceiling reflections.

The cinema room has changed a lot since 2008, as have the acoustics. Initially



'Everyone we have shown the room to is fascinated by it'

no special measurements were taken – this all came over the years, with growing experience.

What's your verdict on the room's performance?

I am really happy with the setup for music (stereo or multichannel), as well as the picture of the 4K projector and the movie sound up to quite high volume levels.

The Genelec front speakers and the SVS subwoofers, combined with the room acoustic work I did, ensure a really good performance.

Having visited around 50 other home cinema installations since this was built, I would rate it in the 'upper quarter'.

Of course, there is always room for improvement, but the only thing I have in mind right now – Genelec 1237 Series models for the front L/C/R, and Genelec A1W26s and A1C25s for the surround and ceiling channels – would be extremely pricey.

What was the last bit of kit you added to the setup?

When it comes to AV hardware, the ceiling speakers are the latest addition, but the new seats are in fact the last item changed in the room. Before we had traditional red cinema seats; the new models are large leather recliners with movable leg, back and head rests.

What's your favourite bit of hardware and why?

Tough question – in the end the sum of all of it is what counts. However, I still think one of the most amazing pieces is the Oppo UDP-203. It's able to flawlessly play everything, be it Super Audio CD, DVD-Audio, Blu-ray, UHD, or whatever files I have. It's a shame Oppo has discontinued its product development.

Do you have your eyes on any hardware upgrades?

As said earlier, maybe a speaker upgrade, but nothing is planned at the moment.



The room is known as the MinMax – and has its own memorabilia-filled foyer



How often does the cinema room get used?

I myself am in there almost every evening, with the whole family probably twice per week. About every three weeks or so we have friends over here for an 'event' – meaning a full house – or simply have another couple over for a nice dinner and a movie. When we have friends here for a movie I play a short starter trailer

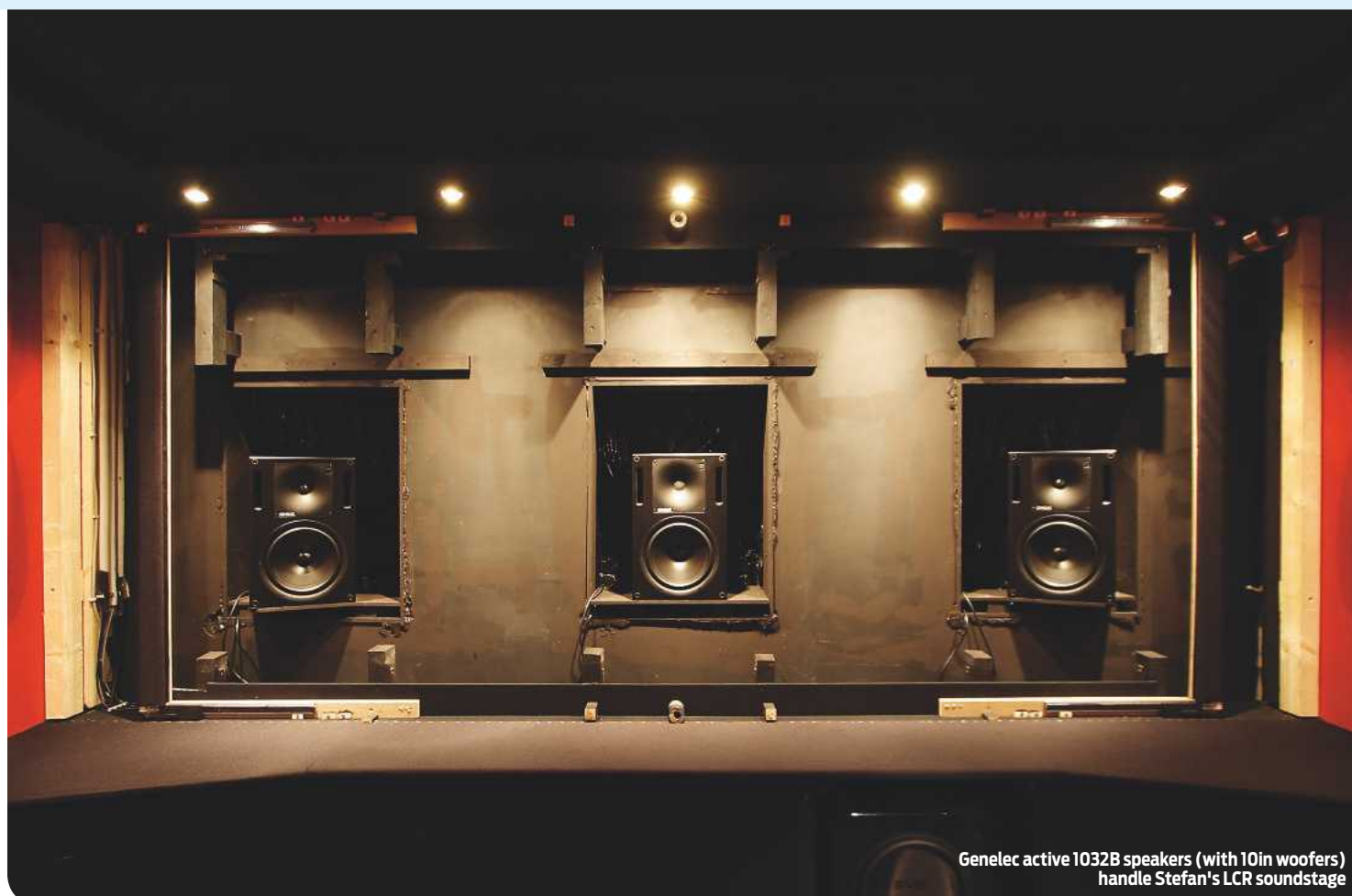
with my logo and a few other trailers. Then the lights dim up a little and my wife/daughter come in with a vendor's tray and ask if anyone wants ice cream or sweets! Then the lights go off again and the real movie of the day starts.

Guests don't see any disc menus or anything; I prepare everything in advance. The result is the real cinema experience – just at home. And better.

Guests get an in-movie snack...



The 'amazing' Oppo UDP-203 (bottom)



Genelec active 1032B speakers (with 10in woofers) handle Stefan's LCR soundstage

Last but not least, there is also a webpage (self-programmed) with a database behind it showing all the movies I have, and a 'ticketing system' (all just for fun – tickets can only be reserved by friends and are, of course, absolutely free).

What discs do you use to show off the system?

I have a collection of scenes – some are just trailers, especially from *The Dark Knight Rises*, with its DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack really shaking the walls.

Others are the fuel station scene from *Terminator: Salvation*; the intro sequence from *Dredd*; the final battle from *Ender's Game*; and

the deep bass sound at the beginning of *Edge of Tomorrow*.

Then there are music Blu-rays including *Beyoncé*, *Alicia Keys: VH1 Storytellers* and *Kraftwerk: 3D The Catalogue*.

For Ultra HD and Dolby Atmos material, *The Matrix* and *Blade Runner 2049* are amazing in both picture and sound.

For 3D I'd recommend *Everest* (also a very nice Atmos track) or *The Walk*.

And what are your top 5 favourite films?

Back to the Future (all three, I see these as one movie); *Dune*; *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*; *War Games* and *The Crow*.

Do you stream movies/TV from Netflix, Amazon, Sky, etc?

I do, from Netflix as well as Amazon Prime, but mostly TV (Netflix originals or similar from Amazon). I rarely stream movies.

What do friends and family think of the cinema room?

My wife, daughter and I all love it and are proud of it.

I have many friends who also have their own similar rooms, so it is not too freaky for them, but I guess most 'normal' people think we are a bit crazy. Still, everyone we have shown the room to, even if not for a full movie, is fascinated by it ■

Share your cinema system in the mag!

If you want to be in **HCC**, you'll need to send us some hi-res images of your cinema room. Here are a few tips...

1. Go big. Set your camera to take images at the largest possible size, and at the highest resolution. Don't worry about cropping or resizing – we will make them print-ready.
2. Get in focus. Make sure your photos are as sharp and clear as possible. If you have one, use a tripod, or place your camera on a flat, steady surface and take pictures on a delay. The sharper they are, the bigger we can print them.
3. Let some light in. While we tend to watch

movies in the dark, our cinema systems look their best when they are lit. If you can shoot with natural daylight, do so. If your room doesn't get a lot of light (a garage conversion, for instance) then switch on whatever lights are fitted. Avoid using flash wherever possible.

4. Be thorough. Send photos of as much of the room as possible. Images of both the front and back of the room, the kit rack, speakers, seating, disc shelf, movie poster art... The more the merrier.

5. Don't be shy. Send a picture of yourself!

6. Show us more. Got pictures of your room before it was a cinema? Or snaps of work being done? We love to see these, too.

Now what?

Email your images to **letters@homecinemachoice.com** with the subject heading 'AV-Holic', and provide your answers to the relevant questions above – then we'll be in touch!

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PLAYBACK

→ **SOFTWARE HIGHLIGHTS** **VENOM** Marvel's anti-hero takes a bite out of Ultra HD Blu-ray **BLACKKKLANSMAN** Spike Lee gets his groove back with this unbelievable true story **KING OF THIEVES** A criminally good British heist caper? **WATERWORLD** Wetter and wilder than ever before **ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA** Martial arts classic gets epic HD makeover & MORE!

A killer 4K release?

The Predator → Twentieth Century Fox → Ultra HD Blu-ray & All-region BD

Just as the title creature has done to its prey so many times, Shane Black's sequel split cinema audiences (and critics) down the middle. Turn the page to learn whether you should hunt down a copy of *The Predator* on 4K Blu-ray

HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

All prices quoted are approximate and may have changed

While the film's score is by Henry Jackman, themes from Alan Silvestri's classic original still feature



Sci-fi via *The Last Boy Scout*

Black and Dekker's *Predator* sequel is heavy on gags, guns and gore – but light on suspense



→ THE PREDATOR

'Did you not see the new Predator? It's evolving.' So says lead character Quinn McKenna (Boyd Holbrook) in this long-awaited sequel directed by Shane Black and co-written with Fred Dekker. The line refers to the bigger, badder trophy-hunting beastie running amok in smalltown USA, but is also an upfront admission that this movie might not be what fans were expecting.

Black takes on this studio blockbuster challenge with glee, layering the movie with foul-mouthed soldiers, black humour and rapid-fire violence – tonally *The Predator* feels more akin to *Predator 2* than the more mature (and more assured) 1987 original. At its best it's sharp, kinetic and filled with blood and belly laughs. At its worst it feels disjointed and out of control.

Picture: The film's gory action arrives on 4K BD with a picture that's as handsome as the Predator is ugly. The image is ultra clean – there's practically no grain or noise at all – yet noticeably more detailed and refined than the HD Blu-ray.

The transfer takes an engagingly strong approach to HDR. Baseline brightness is markedly higher than that of the SDR version, giving major punch to well-lit sequences. The light range has also been

expanded, with slightly deeper, richer blacks at one end of the spectrum and sparkling peaks at the other. This is particularly obvious during night scenes.

The best thing about the 4K BD, though, is its colours. These are much richer than on the oddly washed out HD disc, helping the image look more natural, immersive and three-dimensional.

The only problem with Fox's transfer is that its detail and clarity exposes the shonky quality of some of the VFX.

Audio: The 4K Blu-ray offers a Dolby Atmos track while the Full HD Blu-ray gets a DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix, and it puts the object-based format to great use with potent dynamics and flurries of accurately positioned and aggressive spot effects. These include regular and effective use of the overhead channels, especially during the opening space ship crash and final battle.

Extras: All extras are on the Full HD platter, kicking off with four watchable deleted scenes and a fun 10-minute featurette on the film's evolution and shooting, stuffed with behind-the-scenes footage. An excellent 20-minute piece on creature design is up next, which tracks everything from hand-drawn concepts through to physically crafting the suits. Another enjoyable (16-min) feature covers character development. Not a bad selection. **MC & JA**



HCC VERDICT

The Predator

→ Twentieth Century Fox → UHD Blu-ray & All-region BD → £30

WE SAY: There's no better way to enjoy this raucous reboot than with this excellent 4K Blu-ray transfer.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

The House with a Clock in Its Walls

eOne → Region B BD
£25



Bad taste specialist Eli 'Hostel' Roth makes an unexpected leap into the world of family films with this tale of a 10-

year-old boy who is sent to live in a creepy old mansion with his oddball uncle after his parents are killed in a car crash. A fun mix of silly gags and kid-friendly horror, Roth's movie also looks very appealing on Blu-ray, thanks to a robust 2.40:1 encode. Sadly, there's no sign of the Dolby Atmos track included on Universal's US release – we have to make do with a DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix. Extras are plentiful but – beyond a chat-track – pretty inconsequential. **AvB**



Johnny English Strikes Again

Universal Pictures → All-region BD
£25



Rowan Atkinson's daft secret agent returns for a third film and – once again – your enjoyment will depend entirely on

your tolerance for watching the man who was once Blackadder pulling funny faces and prattling around. While the film did little for us, we can at least report that it looks pretty smart on Blu-ray, with a sharply defined 2.40:1 1080p encode. The DTS:X mix delivers plenty of bass and makes effective use of the surrounds, but discrete height effects are few and far between. Seven short featurettes and a chat-track are also included. **AvB**



Alpha

Sony Pictures → All-region BD
£25



Menace II Society and *The Book of Eli* co-director Albert Hughes helms this gripping and stylish Paleolithic survival adventure about a young tribal hunter (Kodi Smit McPhee) and the

friendship he forms with a wounded wolf. Sony's Blu-ray sports crisp and colourful 2.40:1-framed Full HD versions of two cuts of the movie (the slightly shorter 'Director's Cut' rearranges some scenes for the better and is a little more violent), both accompanied by a potent DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix that keeps the entire soundstage engaged. Extras include deleted scenes and a featurette about the film's furry co-star. **AvB**



Caine and gang are still able

UK robbery drama assembles a fine cast for a solid tale of the ultimate 'one last job'

→ KING OF THIEVES

The robbery at the Hatton Garden Safe Deposit Company, over the 2015 Easter weekend, has so far inspired three movies, all drawn to two details in particular: the value of the property pilfered (estimated at £100-£200m) and the thieves themselves, who turned out to be men in their 60s and 70s.

While *King of Thieves* takes a typically British slant, mining comic elements from a story of OAP criminals, the movie retains a mean(ish) streak. Michael Caine's ring-leader Brian Reader may resemble your grandad, but he's also a career criminal. Even Jim Broadbent is given a chance to show off a capacity for a darker side.

Joe Penhall's screenplay takes a straightforward approach, introducing Reader and his co-conspirators as they plan and then execute the heist, before moving on to the police investigation and the inevitable bickering the successful gang succumbs to. There's not much surprise here (the well-documented true story will be fresh in the memory for many), but it's well-made, well-acted and doesn't overstay its welcome.

Picture: *King of Thieves* was supposedly shot on RED 8K digital cameras, which would explain why this Blu-ray's 2.40:1 1080p presentation doesn't lack for sharpness. Foreground elements are rich in detail, and the textures of clothing, brickwork and silver hair are readily apparent.

Contrast is well-judged. The presentation will feel slightly muted to those growing accustomed to an HDR diet, but there's still a strong range, built upon



rich black levels. The locations are often rather drab, and left that way by a natural colour grade.

Audio: Audio is DTS-HD MA 5.1 (or LPCM stereo) and proves to be competent but mostly unimaginative, beyond the soundtrack choices that see your system fully energised. What's more important is the easy discernibility of the dialogue, and the proficiency here of crafting location ambience via subtle surround effects.

Extras: A middling selection here. A nine-minute featurette (only named 'Featurette' on the disc menu for some reason) gives a brief overview of the events that inspired the film, while a two-minute *Bringing the Ensemble Together* featurette covers much of the same ground. Even a seven-minute interview with Michael Caine overlaps, but does include some fun moments, particularly his guess that he would be asked to play Reader as soon as the story broke. Deleted scenes and a trailer complete the disc. **MC**



Caine and Broadbent are joined by fellow Brits Ray Winstone, Tom Courtenay and Paul Whitehouse

HCC VERDICT

King of Thieves

→ Studiocanal → Region B BD
→ £23

WE SAY: Michael Caine proves typically watchable in this sharp-looking crime drama.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

92 VENOM 4K

DAILY LUNCH SPEC

SANDWICH \$5	PIZZA SLICE \$1	DRINK \$1
GRILLED PORK	PEPPERONI	COKE
TOFU	CHEESE	ESPRESSO
EGG OVER	SUPPER	EGG ROLL
COMBO SPECIAL	SAUSAGE	TOFU
		RICE
HAMBURGER \$2	HOT DOG \$1	
CHEESEBURGER \$2	CORNDOG	
CHILI \$2	CHEESE \$2	

4K
ULTRA
HD

Schizophrenic thrills

Sony's *Spider-Man* spin-off serves up a mishmash of science-fiction, body horror and comedy on a superheroic 4K platter...

DISC
OF THE
MONTH



→ VENOM

If you've seen *Spider-Man 3* then you'll be familiar with Venom, but if not, he's a head-eating alien symbiote that takes over journalist Eddie Brock. Due to various rights issues this new film doesn't include Spider-Man, so instead you get a Venom origin story that concentrates on Brock and his relationship with the symbiote – basically 'one man and his parasite'.

Tom Hardy plays Brock as a man with a split personality, although in this case one of the personalities can turn into a giant monster. Hardy also voices Venom, and the interaction between them provides many of the film's best moments. However, the schizophrenic nature of the lead character also applies to the overall tone of the film.

Venom switches from dark comedy to comic book movie to gritty drama, but since it can't commit to one particular genre the result is unsatisfying. The plot is weak, the supporting cast largely forgettable, and the action set-pieces uninspired. Despite all this the film was a huge hit around the world, and an end-credits scene sets up the inevitable sequel.

Picture: *Venom* melds with Ultra HD Blu-ray to deliver a 4K disc that goes a long way towards making up for the film's shortcomings.

The image is presented in 2.40:1, and although the film was shot using 3.4K and even 8K cameras, the post-production involved a 2K digital intermediate. However there is a definite improvement in resolution when compared to the 1080p Blu-ray encode, and while the difference isn't huge, computer screens, close-ups and city shots all deliver more fine detail.

Overall this is a first-class transfer and thanks to the film's digital capture, the image is sharp, clean, and free of any unwanted artefacts. The HDR grade includes Dolby Vision, and while the deliberately gritty photography doesn't really lend itself to flashy pyrotechnics, the overall look of the image remains suitably dynamic.

Much of the action takes place at night, and the city lights reflect off the wet streets with a pleasing realism. The same is true of Venom himself, and the alien's shiny black skin and contrasting white veins really pop off the screen. The greater latitude offered by HDR also retains more detail in the shadows, while blacks are deep and free of crush.



Tom Hardy says he took the role because his son is a fan of *Venom*



The daytime scenes are also nicely rendered, with bright objects and clouds delivered without any loss of detail in the highlights. The film doesn't really go for big primary colours, but there is a subtlety and depth to the palette that isn't present on the 1080p disc. *Venom* is a great example of just how good a 2K upscale can actually look.

Audio: The film's superb Atmos soundtrack is about as subtle as Eddie Brock's pumped-up alter-ego. It makes full use of the immersive possibilities of today's object-based audio formats, with the additional channels allowing for more precise steering of effects, whether that's simple ambient noise in a restaurant or bullets ricocheting around you.

In one memorable action scene Eddie escapes on a motorbike and is chased by a number of SUVs. This sequence not only employs all the channels, but also delivers some delicious bass as vehicles smash into each other. In fact, the mix makes prodigious use of low-frequency effects, whether that's to hammer home the size and strength of Venom, or to give added impact to a climactic punch-up.



There's a pleasing clarity and width to the audio, with the music effectively spread across the front soundstage and mid-range and higher frequencies nicely rendered. Dialogue always remains clear and focused, even when Hardy is in full mumble mode. The sound designers also cleverly use the overhead channels to put you inside Eddie's head when Venom is talking to him.

Extras: The only extra on the 4K disc is a sneak peek at the superior *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, which is also tacked on to the end of the film to pad out its relatively short running time. All other extras are on the Full HD disc, and although the packaging makes a big deal about the 'Venom Mode' it's really just a glorified trivia track.

There are six featurettes that run about an hour in total and do a good job of explaining the history of Venom, as well as covering the film's production and effects. Rounding out a solid set of extras are three short deleted and extended scenes, a number of Pre-Vis sequences, and a pair of music videos (one from *Venom* and one from *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*). **SW**



Director Ruben Fleischer's next film will be a sequel to his 2009 hit *Zombieland*

HCC VERDICT

Venom

→ Sony Pictures → Ultra HD Blu-ray & All-region BD → £35

WE SAY: Despite an up-and-down tone and mediocre action, this 4K disc is saved by excellent AV.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

Arcade Action

Bigscreen home entertainment isn't just about movies anymore. **Rik Henderson** checks out a videogame vying for time on your home cinema system...



Super Smash Bros. Ultimate

Nintendo → Nintendo Switch → £60

Nintendo's madcap fighting game finally hits its latest console and does so in style. *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* lives up to its name as the gaming giant has thrown everything at this version, including playable characters we'd forgotten even existed. Yep, even the Wii Fit Trainer and Cloud from *Final Fantasy VII*.

It effectively plays much like other *Super Smash Bros.* games from yesteryear, from its N64 debut in the 1990s onwards. It is a 2D beat-'em-up on multiple platforms and capable of catering for up to eight challengers in its multiplayer modes.



However, it is the single-player adventure modes that really win it for us. They are essential for unlocking a mighty selection of the in-game characters, but that's fine as you'll want to progress anyway. Matches never feel the same as the more than 70 available characters each have their own overblown moves. And the action is so fast and frantic that you'll whizz through battles fairly quickly – at least initially, until they get mind-numbingly tough.

It was originally thought that this version of *Smash Bros.* would be a port of the Wii U outing, but while there are some similarities it is a much bigger, faster and more involving title. It is also far prettier with 1080p when the Switch is in docked mode and 720p when portable. Both keep to a super-smooth 60fps which suits the fast-paced nature of the game.

The one thing we will say is that we found the Joy-Cons a little harder to use when handheld, with a Pro Controller preferred when docked. There are some motion controls that allow for waving your arms around but it's probably best to avoid them. It's really more of a gimmick than anything useful.

Nintendo rarely gets anything wrong when it develops its own games and that is evident here again. The use of both its own, and third-party, licences make for some excellent match-ups and playing eight-player battles online is a great way to let off steam. Plus, let's face it, getting to fight as the pink ball-like Kirby against the Game and Watch guy is always going to be hilarious.



Hotel Artemis

Warner Bros. → All-region BD
£25



Strip it of its near future sci-fi trappings and this pulp thriller about the plan to kill a gang boss during his stay in a secret hospital that caters to criminals could well feel like part of the *John Wick* franchise. It doesn't quite measure up to those films, yet still delivers a similarly enjoyable mix of high-concept ideas, stylish violence and dry humour. It also makes for an agreeable BD, marrying a sharp and colourful 2.40:1 Full HD image to a particularly lively DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix. A worthwhile chat-track by the director and editor is the sole extra. **AvB**



A Simple Favour

Lionsgate → Region B BD
£25



If the quality of a movie reflects the experience that people had making it, then director Paul Feig and stars Anna Kendrick and Blake Lively clearly had a blast subverting expectations with this deliciously twisty and funny slice of 'suburban noir'. Although *A Simple Favour* isn't the most visually dynamic movie, it arrives on Blu-ray with a pristine 2.00:1 Full HD encode bursting with warm colours and cleanly delineated textures. Meanwhile, the Dolby TrueHD 7.1 soundtrack is unexpectedly involving. A trio of commentaries heads up a sizeable set of bonus features that puts most blockbusters to shame. **AvB**



Elvira: Mistress of the Dark

Arrow Video → Region B BD
£25



This cult 1988 horror comedy sees Cassandra Petersen's TV hostess persona Elvira making the leap to the silver screen for a fabulously silly and smutty adventure packed with more *double entendres* than most *Carry On...* movies. Making the most of *Elvira...*'s assets (oo-er!), Arrow serves up a thrillingly film-like 2K restoration of an original 35mm interpositive. *Elvira...* is also stacked (phwoar!) with extras, including three commentaries and a 97-minute retrospective *Making of...* documentary. **AvB**





4K
ULTRA
HD

Still doing the right thing

Spike Lee's timely satire goes to show that truth is far more outrageous than fiction

→ BLACKKKLANSMAN

Based on the (remarkably) true story of a black detective involved in an undercover operation against the Ku Klux Klan in the 1970s, Spike Lee's latest deftly combines some of the director's best deadpan humour since *Do The Right Thing* with unflinchingly sharp observations of racism in America both at the time the film is set and today.

There are strong performances from all the leads, and aside from one or two overlong moments of self-indulgence in the film's first third, Lee balances the political messaging with narrative drive superbly. There are even some genuine moments of triumph here – though typically and astutely, these are almost immediately followed by a hard slapdown.

Picture: Lee shot *BlackKkKlansman* on film, from which a 4K digital intermediate was created for the film's cinematic run. This 4K DI provides the UHD Blu-ray picture we have here.

Detail levels are substantially higher than they on the Full HD encode. Not reference-grade, perhaps, but skin and clothing undoubtedly contain much more info. There's a better sense of depth too, and the 4K master captures the grain inherent to 35mm much more effectively than the 1080p disc.

The application of HDR is strong for a master taken from film. For starters,

it sensibly doesn't push the baseline brightness levels too high. There's still a noticeable lift to daylight exteriors, though, and the expanded light range delivers real impact with Lee's sometimes highly stylised visuals.

Black levels can look a little elevated, but this is less of an issue with the Dolby Vision grade of the film Universal's 4K Blu-ray also carries. That option also delivers marginal colour refinements, especially during bright sequences.

Audio: *BlackKkKlansman*'s Dolby story also includes an Atmos mix. Dialogue is pristine and well contextualised, even when it's overlapped during some busy group shots. The mix works hard, too, to deliver subtle ambient and placement effects that capture a scene's sense of space.

The dynamics open up nicely for the musical interludes, occasional gunfire and one big explosion.

Just don't go into *BlackKkKlansman* expecting your speakers to get anything like a *Blade Runner 2049*-style workout.

Extras: Bonus features are disappointingly limited; there's no Lee chat track (which are always good value). Instead, found on both the 4K and 1080p Blu-rays is just a five-minute *Making of...* featurette and an extended trailer. The former looks briefly at the story behind the film and Spike Lee's helmsmanship, but ultimately leaves you wanting more a whole lot more. **JA**



Lead actor John David Washington is the son of Denzel Washington



HCC VERDICT

BlackKkKlansman

→ Universal Pictures → Ultra HD Blu-ray & All-region BD → £35

WE SAY: Lee's 1970s-set black comedy makes a solid 4K HDR debut, but we would have loved more extras.

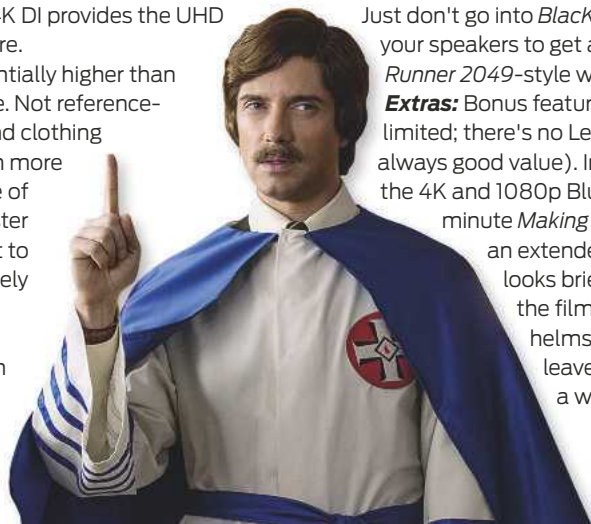
Movie: ★★★★★

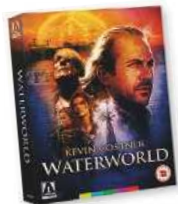
Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★





Arrow sets sail for adventure

Kevin Costner's action epic makes a splash with this packed Blu-ray release

→ WATERWORLD: LIMITED EDITION

Originally conceived of as a low-budget *Mad Max* rip-off, this seagoing post-apocalyptic action flick ended up making waves for all the wrong reasons. Plagued by rewrites, cost overruns and production problems, *Waterworld* – which had already turned into a \$100m blockbuster when director Kevin Reynolds and star Kevin Costner came aboard – ended up costing \$175m, a record for the time.

But for all the negative press that surrounded its production and release, *Waterworld* did make a profit and, if not some under appreciated classic, it's not a total dud either. This is particularly true of the two extended cuts that are also present in this Blu-ray release. Running some 40 minutes longer than the original theatrical release, the Extended TV Cut and 'Ulysses' edit (which restores some violence and language ripped from the TV version) fill in obvious plot holes and dive a little deeper into the fascinatingly weird world the film creates.

Unfortunately, even they can't do anything about Costner's dull leading man, nor the mundane action-movie plotting that propels the central narrative's second and third acts.

Picture: All three Blu-ray presentations of the film are derived from a new 4K scan of the original camera negatives (with the two extended cuts also using additional intermediary 35mm elements). Each gets a disc of its own.

Compared to the older Universal release, Arrow's 1.85:1-framed 1080p encode of the theatrical cut looks much more organic, with improved detailing,



colour reproduction and grain retention. For the most part, the extra footage added to the extended cuts also looks very impressive, although a few sections are clearly drawn from lower-quality source material.

Audio: DTS-HD MA 5.1 and 2.0 stereo soundtracks are provided for the three cuts. While they lack the sort of nuance you'd find in modern blockbuster mixes, the 5.1 tracks are bombastic affairs that have no problem immersing you during big action set-pieces – such as the Smokers' attack on the atoll (Chapter 3) – without overwhelming the dialogue. Bass is pleasingly tactile and impactful.

Extras: Disc-based bonus features take the form of a superb new 102-minute *Making of...* documentary; an archival promo featurette; a look at Hollywood's history of end-of-the-world blockbusters; six image galleries; two trailers and 14 TV spots. This Limited Edition set also includes six lobby card reproductions, a double-sided poster and a 60-page book. **AvB**



Dennis Hopper's scenery-chewing turn as chief villain The Deacon is one of the film's biggest delights



HCC VERDICT

Waterworld: Limited Edition

→ Arrow Video → Region B BD
→ £30

WE SAY: Fans of Costner's soggy action epic should definitely splash out on this deluxe Blu-ray release.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

Searching

Sony Pictures → All-region BD
£15 [HMV exclusive]



A gimmick in search of a better storyline, this missing person thriller is told entirely through smartphone screens and laptop windows. As shown by 2015's *Unfriended*, it's an idea that can work very well. However, after a solid opening act, *Searching* begins to falter and if you can't tell whodunnit by the 30-minute mark you clearly don't watch many films. Visually, the Blu-ray is a mixed bag: screen icons and desktop windows are pin-sharp, but the video they show is intentionally murky and pixelated. The DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix is front-heavy. A chat-track and two featurettes are also included. **MC**



Crimson Peak: Limited Edition

Arrow Video → Region B BD
£30



Given the exceptional quality of the Full HD encode and DTS:X mix found on Universal's original 2015 Blu-ray, it's hardly surprising that Arrow hasn't bothered to tamper with either aspect for this reissue. What it has done is add a bunch of new extras alongside all the pre-existing goodies. Highlights include a 'newly edited' 50-minute *Making of...* and critical discussion of the film and director Guillermo del Toro's body of work in relation to the Gothic Romance tradition. The beautifully designed set also boasts an 80-page book. **AvB**



The Meg [4K]

Warner Bros. → Ultra HD Blu-ray & All-region BD → £35



Despite being a 2K upscale, the 2160p presentation of this enjoyable big-budget B-movie offers a more satisfying viewing experience than the 1080p disc reviewed last issue. Thanks to its HDR grading (offered in both HDR10 and Dolby Vision), the colourful 2.40:1-framed 4K encode copes better with the film's contrast-rich visuals; blacks are tighter and whites much strident. More subtle colour gradations also limit the banding issues that troubled the Full HD transfer. The 4K disc features the same, excellent, Atmos mix included on the regular Blu-ray. **MC**



Philadelphia [4K]

Sony Pictures → Ultra HD Blu-ray & Region B BD → £30



The aerial photography and stock inserts in this Tom Hanks/Denzel Washington drama exhibit softness, but beyond that this is another excellent Sony Pictures back-catalogue 4K release. It's deliciously sharp (check out the street shot that opens Chapter 8 for some pixel refinement), clean, and showcases increased colour saturation and subtlety over its 1080p iteration. A new Dolby Atmos soundmix, meanwhile, does what it can with the movie's low-key audio design. A good range of extras (some new for this 25th Anniversary Edition) are all on the Full HD disc. **MC**





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Time for a change... or three

Alien frog-men, Arabian mystics and giant pink snakes welcome a new Who

→ DOCTOR WHO: THE COLLECTION – SEASON 19

1982 was a year of change for *Doctor Who*. For the first time the show departed its traditional Saturday night slot, switching to twice-weekly weekday airings instead. Meanwhile, behind-the-scenes, Christopher Bidmead stepped down as script editor, handing the reins to first Anthony Root and then Eric Saward.

But the biggest change, of course, was the Doctor himself. With Tom Baker having left the previous year, audiences had to get used to a younger, less experienced incarnation of the Timelord played by 29-year-old Peter Davison.

Given all these changes being wrung behind the scenes, it's hardly surprising that the quality of the seven stories that make up Davison's first season varies considerably. Opener *Castrovalva* pits the Doctor against the Master in an Escher-esque fictional world. *Four to Doomsday* is a bit of a mess, but Stratford Johns is clearly having fun as a frog-like baddie with aspirations to godhood. Despite some dodgy FX, *Kinda* is one of Davison's best stories (and, thankfully, the option to watch the story with the surprisingly effective CGI snake created for the DVD is included on the Blu-ray, too).

The Visitation and *Black Orchid* are both enjoyable historical romps. The former sees the Doctor battling aliens and their glam android in the 17th century, the latter is a neat little two-part 1925 tale of mistaken identity and murder. *Earthshock* gives the Cybermen a much-needed reboot, but is best remembered for



Peter Davison sits down for a brand-new 68-minute chat about playing the Doctor

HCC VERDICT

Doctor Who: The Collection – Season 19

→ BBC Studios → All-region BD
→ £50

WE SAY: Another superb package – and the increase in 16mm material leads to an uptick in image quality.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

traumatising viewers by showing that the Doctor's companions don't always get a happy ending. Finally, *Time-Flight* somehow manages to make a story about Concorde being sucked into the prehistoric past both disappointing and rather offensive.

Picture: As with the previous...Season 12 Blu-ray boxset [reviewed in HCC #289] these new 1080i50 encodes are made up from a mix of upscaled SD studio recordings and 16mm location footage that has been newly scanned and restored in HD. While the former still looks pretty rough (with no shortage of aliasing and bleed), the latter looks beautifully detailed and organic. As there's a higher percentage of location material this season, taken as a whole the overall image quality is rather more pleasing than that of the earlier...Who BD.

Audio: The episodes' original mono soundtracks (DTS-HD MA 2.0) have been restored and sound as fresh as the day they were first recorded. *Kinda* and *Earthshock* also benefit from surround remixes (DTS-HD MA 5.1) that open the soundfield a bit thanks to judicious use of the rear channels.

Extras: While only the most hardcore of Whovians would probably fancy sitting through the eight-plus hours of raw studio and location footage included in this boxset, there's still a wealth of goodies for less dedicated fans to enjoy. In addition to the majority of the extras assembled for the DVDs, there's plenty of original content, including new *Making of...* docs for *Castrovalva*, *Four to Doomsday*, *Black Orchid*, *Earthshock* and *Time-Flight*, plus Gogglebox-style *Behind the Sofa* featurettes for each story. **AvB**



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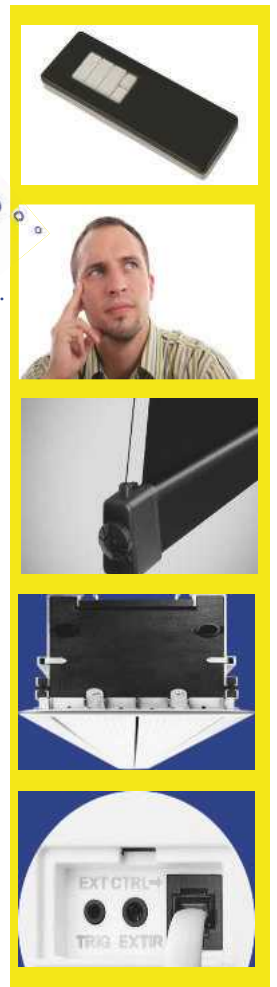
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Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice

Arrow Academy → All-region BD
£25



One of 1969's biggest US box office hits (only *Butch Cassidy...*, *Midnight Cowboy*, *Easy Rider* and *Hello, Dolly!*

raked in more cash), this counterculture satire has been largely forgotten today – possibly because it is so much a product of its time. This is a real shame, as it remains an endearing, funny and very well acted film that it well worth (re-)discovering. Seemingly based on the same HD master as the disc *Twilight Time* put out in the US early last year, Arrow's 1.85:1 encode is pleasingly warm and colourful. Extras include a pair of commentaries. **AvB**



The Cooler: Limited Edition

101 Films - Black Label → Region B BD & R2 DVD → £15



This Blu-ray outing for Wayne Kramer's unconventional 2003 romantic drama is a truly frustrating affair.

On the one hand there's a fantastic array of extras, which includes a wonderful new *Making of...* documentary (which runs 15 minutes longer than the film). On the other hand there's the flat and lifeless 1080i50 (!) HD presentation of the film itself, which Kramer has taken to social media to express his disappointment with. The disc's default stereo mix has some distortion issues, too – thankfully the 5.1 option fares better. **AvB**



Black '47

Altitude → Region B BD
£20



An Irish Western in all but name, this revenge drama swaps out the Wild West for the Irish famine of the 1840s.

James Frecheville stars as the former soldier waging a one-man war against the imperialist regime he blames for his family's deaths, while Hugo Weaving is a fellow former Irish Ranger tasked with bringing him to justice. This brisk thriller comes to Blu-ray with a suitably bleak (almost monochrome) 2.40:1 Full HD encode that matches the sombre tone of the material. The DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix is fairly low-key, but still delivers some dynamic punch when needed. **AvB**



Texas, Adios

Arrow Video → Region B BD
£25



Released in some countries as a sequel to the same year's *Django* (which it clearly isn't), this oddly traditional

1966 'Spaghetti Western' stars Franco Nero as a Texas sheriff who heads south of the border to bring to justice the man who killed his father. Derived from a 2K restoration of the original two-perf negative, Arrow's 2.35:1 HD encode holds up very well – although there are some curious horizontal striations baked into the image at around the 01:07:56 mark. In addition to a choice of English and Italian mono mixes, the disc also serves up some informative extras. **AvB**



Maybe we should do that again?

Absentee Atmos mixes take the shine off BBC's great-looking nature series

→ DYNASTIES

The BBC Natural History Unit and Sir David Attenborough are back with another documentary series that wows with its high production values and skilful narrative. *Dynasties* focuses on five endangered species (chimpanzees, emperor penguins, lions, tigers and African wild dogs), giving an hour-long episode to each.

Those familiar with recent Beeb nature docs *Planet Earth II* and *Blue Planet II* will know what to expect. The camera-work here is sublime, moving from slow-mo to fast-motion, close-ups to epic, panoramic sweeps, while excellent editing and Attenborough's uncomplicated narration create involving stories from the reams and reams of painstakingly shot footage.

Picture: The show was made available last year in 4K HDR (HLG) via iPlayer. If you missed it then, this double-disc set will let you know what all the fuss was about. Picture quality-wise, it's very impressive.

Firstly, it's thrillingly crisp and clean, particularly with close-up shots, where the wealth of pixel info and absence of noise leads to an image that urges you to stop and stare. Sequences like a baby chimpanzee playing on the ground are filled with minute, crystal-clear details, from strands of fur to grains of sand.

The HDR grade (HDR10) feels harmonious with the source material, as opposed to simply layered on. Sunlight catches on leaves and animal limbs; ice floes glisten. Compared to the SDR version, this has



obviously more nuance and depth to its contrast range. And HDR leads to a greater impact from *Dynasties'* colour palette, which feels natural and showcases effortless gradations.

Audio: An example of never taking disc sleeve information at face value, BBC Studios' Ultra HD Blu-ray states the series has Dolby Atmos soundmixes, but this transpires not to be the case – at least for the 4K version. There's no audio option offered on the basic menu; the disc plays out in DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1. Yet Atmos mixes are found on the 1080p platters. This is an annoying technical snafu (the Atmos tracks are obviously the better option), but at least the 5.1 audio is effective, with an impressive dynamic range and attention to detail.

Extras: There are no extras as such, but each episode on the 1080p discs includes an 'on location' epilogue – annoyingly for those viewing the show in 4K, this isn't instantly accessible from the disc menu. **MC**



Dynasties' production lasted for over four years

HCC VERDICT

Dynasties

→ BBC Studios → Ultra HD Blu-ray & Region B BD → £35

WE SAY: An audio mix mix-up means *Dynasties*, while worth watching, needs a re-release.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★☆☆☆

OVERALL: ★★★★★

Come and have a go
if you think you're
hard enough!



Jet-powered kung fu classics

Tsui Hark's legendary trio of 1990s martial arts epics hits Blu-ray with an extra movie in tow

→ ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA TRILOGY

Drawing on the life of Qing Dynasty folk hero Wong Fei-hung (already the subject of hundreds of films and TV series) writer-director Tsui Hark's 1991 hit finds its martial arts instructor/medical practitioner protagonist running afoul of both local gangsters and corrupt foreign imperialist forces with their own designs on the country.

In addition to providing Jet Li with his breakout role and serving up a series of sensational fight scenes (choreographed by *The Matrix*'s Yuen Woo-ping), this remarkable film is also particularly politically charged – although this is less surprising when you consider it was made just a couple of years after the Tiananmen Square massacre and in the run-up to the handover of Hong Kong to China.

1992's *Once Upon a Time in China II* is every bit the match for the original. This time out Li's Wong Fei-hung is visiting Canton for a medical symposium, only to end up battling a xenophobic cult determined to rid China of all Western influences. And if that wasn't bad enough, he also gets caught up in the conflict between anti-imperialist rebels and a by-the-book military officer (Donnie Yen).

The following year's *Once Upon a Time in China III* takes a step back from overt politics for a tale of gangsters trying to cheat in a lion dance competition. It's still a fun film, but the over-abundance of wire-fu action coupled to an oddly low-stakes story means that it pales in comparison to its predecessors.



After two further instalments without him, Jet Li returned to the series for 1997's *Once Upon a Time in China and America*. Directed by Sammo Hung, this enjoyable romp features Wong Fei-hung in America's Wild West, once again fighting forces of nationalism and xenophobia.

Picture: All four films included in this boxset have been given new restorations – 4K in the case of the first three and 2K for *...China and America*. Compared to the earlier releases fans will be familiar with, the new encodes of the original trilogy deliver a remarkable upgrade in clarity and sharpness. Colours also look far richer, while textures are finely detailed.

In addition to being based on a 2K restoration, it's clear that the final film in the series hasn't received the same level of TLC, looking softer and with more obvious DNR in evidence. Still, as it's only really been included as an extra, it's hard to complain too much.

Audio: The films offer a mix of Cantonese, Mandarin and English tracks in mono, stereo and (in the case of the latter language) 5.1 lossless presentations. Quality is variable, with the 'original' Cantonese tracks generally sounding a little more authentic and as if additional clean-up work has been undertaken. As good as they sound, the biggest surprise for fans may in fact be the new subtitles, which are littered with a number of 'F-bombs'.

Extras: As well as an entire bonus movie, Eureka's 'Trilogy' boxset stocks plenty of other goodies. These include commentaries for the first three films, new and archival interviews, booklets and a three-part documentary about Wong Fei-hung. **Avb**

HCC VERDICT

Once Upon a Time in China Trilogy

→ Eureka Entertainment
→ Region B BD → £47

WE SAY: Superb HD restorations of three martial arts classics – with a bonus film thrown in, too.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★



Never mind the gimmicks

The cinematic showman gets weirder than ever as he moves away from horror

→ WILLIAM CASTLE AT COLUMBIA: VOLUME TWO

Indicator's first William Castle boxset [see HCC #293] celebrated the filmmaker's gimmicky fright flicks. This second collection rounds up a quartet of more disparate films where any gimmicks, if they exist at all, are little more than after-thoughts.

Zotz! (1962) is an uneven slapstick comedy about a professor of ancient languages (Tom Poston) who comes into possession of a magical coin that can be used to slow down time or even cause death.

Saint Trinians meets Walt Disney in 1963's truly bizarre *13 Frightened Girls* (aka *The Candy Trap*), a kid-friendly caper about a US diplomat's daughter who fancies herself a spy after uncovering a murder.

While not a patch on James Whale's 1932 original, *The Old Dark House* (1963) is more enjoyable than its reputation may suggest. Made in conjunction with Hammer, it's a pleasingly lavish looking horror-comedy, enlivened by a game cast that includes Robert Morley, Peter Bull and Fenella Fielding.

Finally, *Straight-Jacket* (1964) is a fantastically trashy thriller from the pen of *Psycho*'s Robert Bloch, starring Joan Crawford as a woman released from a mental asylum after killing her husband years earlier. But it isn't long before people start being hacked to death again...

Picture: All four movies are based on HD masters supplied by Sony and by and large they look pretty good. *Zotz!* is the weakest of the quartet, exhibiting some obvious tram-lines down the middle of the screen at times. Colour films *13 Frightened Girls* and *The Old Dark House* look particularly impressive and



He's behind you...

lush, while the grittier black-and-white aesthetic of *Straight-Jacket* has been faithfully reproduced.

Audio: The films are accompanied by restored versions of their original mono soundtracks (LPCM, except for *13 Frightened Girls* which opts for DTS-HD MA instead). The quality is generally very good, with very little distortion, reasonable range and crystal-clear dialogue.

Extras: Each of the four discs is loaded with bonus features. There are hugely informative and enjoyable new commentaries from critics Kat Ellinger (*Zotz!*), Samm Deighan (*13 Frightened Girls*), Kim Newman and Stephen Jones (*The Old Dark House*) and Lee Gambin and Emma Westwood (*Straight-Jacket*); isolated music and effects tracks; introductions by Castle fan Stephen Laws; critical appreciations and other treats. You can also choose from three different viewing options for both *13 Frightened Girls* and *The Old Dark House*. **AvB**



HCC VERDICT

William Castle at Columbia: Volume Two

→ Indicator → All-region BD
→ £43

WE SAY: An eccentric quartet of films given better Blu-ray treatment than many major studio classics.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

Laura

Eureka/Masters of Cinema
Region B BD → £18



Here at HCC we're suckers for a good film noir, and this 1944 mystery starring Gene Tierney and Dana

Andrews is up there with the very best of them. The good news, then, is that this Masters of Cinema Blu-ray does the film justice; not only does the restored 1.37:1 encode do wonders for *Laura*'s moody photography, but there are two cuts to choose from – the longer of which adds a short sequence sliced by the studio for fear of being 'too decadent' for wartime audiences. Extras include a pair of audio commentaries and four archival radio productions of the story. **AvB**



Berserk

Indicator → All-region BD
£16



Indicator doubles up on Joan Crawford chillers (see above) with a BD outing for this lurid 1967 British shocker about

a series of murders at a circus. While the film is pretty enjoyable (although it's bogged down by way too much circus footage), the boutique label has once again pulled out all of the stops for this release. So, in addition to a good-looking 1.85:1 Full HD encode, you also get plenty of extras, including a lively commentary from film historians Lee Gambin and Eloise Ross, plus a fascinating overview of Crawford's career from former HCC staffer Pamela Hutchinson. **AvB**



Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte

Eureka/Masters of Cinema
Region B BD → £20



Hollywood legends Bette Davis and Olivia de Havilland star in this 1964 psychological thriller (or 'Grande Dame Guignol' as film historian Glenn Erickson puts it in his chat-track)

about an aging Southern belle's decent into madness. Eureka's Blu-ray serves up a well-defined AVC 1.85:1 Full HD encode that gets the best out of the film's black-and-white photography, accompanied by an LPCM 2.0 soundtrack that offers a pleasingly wide dynamic range. In addition to the chat-track mentioned above, this UK disc also counts a brand-new commentary by Kat Ellinger among its solid extras. **AvB**



A film that's worth Tweeting about

Sandra Bullock leads this cast in this eye-opening Netflix Original horror with AV charms

→ BIRD BOX

Bird Box recalls the B-movie action thrillers that used to be the backbone of genre cinema. With a stripped-back aesthetic, it moves so fast you barely have time to realise how little sense it makes.

Told in flashback, the movie introduces pregnant artist Mallorie (Sandra Bullock), watching unexplained outbreaks of violent suicide on the TV. She doesn't have time to take in the unfolding horror, as she needs to get to hospital for a prenatal check-up. It transpires this is the perfect location for an insanity outbreak – and soon there's a mass panic as people embark on an orgy of self-destruction.

While *Bird Box* recycles tropes made familiar by countless zombie films, there's a freshness to the execution. You don't need to get bitten – just look, and you get turned. As the only protection is a blindfold it's tempting to draw comparisons with another sensory-deprivation thriller, *A Quiet Place*, but *Bird Box* plays more to John Carpenter and J.J. Abrams.

Director Susanne (*The Night Manager*) Bier and screenwriter Eric (*Arrival*) Heisserer don't waste time elaborating on the threat, beyond some religious end-of-days babble, and we never see the beasties – although we know what they look like thanks to some smart storytelling. Both are good calls, adding to the efficiency of this Lovecraftian horror.

Picture: Available in 4K HDR/Dolby Vision, depending on your setup, *Bird Box* rewards with sharp, detailed images. Director of photography Salvatore Totino (last seen



lensing *Spider-Man: Homecoming*) shoots primarily in daylight and on brightly lit interiors, cutting to blindfolded POVs shot through fabric for added claustrophobia. Consequently, the grade doesn't exploit peak HDR, but the image always looks crisp and theatrical. The opening outbreak, which hits hard, is a spectacular slice of visual horror action.

Audio: *Bird Box* streams in either 5.1 or Dolby Atmos, and either way the sound design is highly entertaining. From the grinding, atmospheric score from Nine Inch Nails rockers Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross, to the delicate birdsong which forewarns of an impending attack, the soundtrack is both intense and inventive. Listen out for the fearsome noise when the unseen demons make their approach. Sound designer Ben Barker reportedly multitracked thirty different sounds to create the effect. **SM**



Bird Box amassed more opening-week viewers than any previous Netflix original movie

HCC VERDICT

Bird Box

→ Netflix Original

WE SAY: Fast-paced and atmospheric, *Bird Box* is definitely worth looking out for.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

→ ESCAPE AT DANNEMORA: SEASON ONE

→ Sky Atlantic/Boxsets

Ben Stiller is best-known for goofing around in throwaway comedy flicks; here he gets behind the camera to direct a thoughtful, high-calibre, prison escape drama, with Academy Award-winning actors Patricia Arquette and Benicio Del Toro along for the ride.

Based upon a real-life breakout in 2015 from Clinton Correctional Facility in Dannemora, New York, this eight-episode Showtime series – available to binge via Sky Boxsets, with each episode around an hour in length – takes its pacing seriously, eschewing conventional TV beats in favour of unfurling its central drama and giving backbone to its characterisations.

Keeping your attention are the central performances. Del Toro is intensely believable as convicted murderer Richard Matt, whose physicality and assuredness overshadows his weedier escape conspirator David Sweat (played by Paul Dano).

Arquette, meanwhile, fascinates as the downtrodden prison staffer who becomes romantically involved with the pair.

Stiller's confident direction plays its part. Long takes and slow-moving cameras heighten the series' languid pace. The staging is cinematic rather than televisual, with a CinemaScope aspect ratio. Brett Johnson and Michael Tolkin's script's depiction of prison life is harsh and humdrum, but the cinematography finds bleak beauty amidst the locations. The sound design gives priority to dialogue and the Americana-filled soundtrack.

It's surprising to see a show with such A-grade credentials not available in 4K, but Sky's HD presentation is still a pleasant watch in terms of clarity, although compression noise/blocking can prove a distraction. A Blu-ray release in the future would be welcome. **MC**



Stiller's team were allowed to shoot some scenes within the Clinton Correctional Facility

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Tom Hardy

From petrolhead hero to London gangster, via mixed martial artist and *Star Trek* villain, the UK actor has pursued a varied career. **Team HCC** follows *Venom* with ten more Tom Hardy star turns

THE DARK KNIGHT RISES

Adding an extra layer of menace to Christopher Nolan's Batman reimagining is Tom Hardy's portrayal of villain Bane from trilogy closer *The Dark Knight Rises*, which is about as far removed from Jeep Swanson's pantomime thug in *Batman & Robin* as possible. Hardy bulks up, shaves his head and adopts a deep, guttural voice in the role of a sewer-dwelling baddie seeking to destroy Gotham, but plays this comic book creation absolutely straight. A career highlight.

Get it: All three of Nolan's caped crusader flicks were released on a 4K BD boxset by Warner in 2017 – *TDKR* looks particularly lush thanks to the director's blend of 35mm and IMAX photography. Worth the upgrade over the previous 1080p outing, despite audio remaining 'flat' 5.1.



THE TAKE

This four-part Sky 1 drama from 2009, adapted from a novel by crime writer Martina Cole, slipped under the radar, but those who caught it will remember Tom Hardy's central performance as fresh-out-of-prison gangster Freddie Jackson. Charismatic and terrifying, he elevates the series above run-of-the-mill East London crime fodder.

Get it: *The Take* remains available on single-disc BD and DVD releases from ITV Studios, and is currently a pay-per-view option on Amazon Prime Video.



BRONSON

Directed by Nicholas Winding Refn, this jaw-dropping 2008 biopic of the notoriously violent UK prisoner Michael Peterson (aka Charles Bronson) was a film that made audiences sit up and take notice of the then 30-year-old Hardy, and the first to see him pile on the pounds for his art. Refn's unusual approach to the material also marked him out as one to watch.

Get it: eOne's UK BD misses out on the director's commentary found on the German and French discs, so fans may want to import.



LEGEND

Brit-flicks about notorious East End gangsters the Kray twins are ten-a-penny, but only one of them gives you a double-dose of Tom Hardy. And the actor is absolutely electrifying here, his twin roles as Ronnie and Reggie Kray going a long way towards papering over the flaws in Brian Helgeland's film. Even if you're as bored as movies about the Krays as we are, Hardy's *tour de force* performance(s) make *Legend* well worth a look.

Get it: The UK Blu-ray adds to the film's appeal with an impressive 1080p encode and Atmos audio.



TABOO: SERIES ONE

Tom Hardy reunited with *Peaky Blinders* and *Locke* writer Steven Knight for this dark (in every sense of the word) eight-part BBC revenge drama set in an especially grimy 19th century London. Co-written by Hardy and his father Chips, *Taboo* is pure period pulp that wants nothing more than to shock, surprise and entertain – all things it does with ease and aplomb. Now where's that second season?

Get it: Studiocanal's Blu-ray is disappointingly barebones, but it's still the best version available.



WARRIOR

Hardy stars alongside Joel Edgerton in this 2011 sports drama about two estranged brothers (Hardy's former marine and Edgerton's struggling physics teacher) who both sign up to compete in a Mixed Martial Arts tournament. While there's little surprise in how this setup pans out, *Warrior*'s fight scenes are superb, and the movie delivers plenty of emotional gut-punches that make a ring-side seat worthwhile.

Get it: Lionsgate's recent Ultra HD release K.O.'s the original Blu-ray with its 4K HDR visuals and upgraded Atmos sonics.



STAR TREK: NEMESIS

Who's that playing a youthful clone of Enterprise captain Jean-Luc Picard? It's then-unknown actor Tom Hardy, giving an early insight into his talent as baddie Shinzon. ...*Nemesis* (2002) was the last *Star Trek* film before Paramount pulled the plug and turned its attention to a series refresh, and isn't well-regarded – but everyone has to start somewhere.

Get it: Paramount's Blu-ray packs over three hours of bonus features, including deleted scenes and three chat tracks!



THE REVENANT

A hypnotic blend of stunning cinematography and gripping storytelling, *The Revenant* deservedly scooped Oscars for director Alejandro González Iñárritu and leading man Leonardo DiCaprio as left-for-dead fur trapper Hugh Glass. Yet Hardy also earned a supporting actor nomination for his performance as John Fitzgerald, the focus of Glass's revenge...

Get it: Arguably the first 4K release to showcase the HDR capacity of the format, Fox's UHD platter is a must-own. Includes the excellent *World Unseen* documentary.



LOCKE

As film concepts go, the idea of watching 90 minutes of a man talking on the phone while driving from Birmingham to London doesn't exactly sound like cinematic gold. And yet, thanks in no small part to Hardy's portrayal of someone trying to cope as his life falls apart around him, writer-director Steven Knight's minimalist movie is as gripping as any high-stakes thriller.

Get it: Not the kind of disc you pull out to show off your AV system, but the UK BD delivers detailed 1080p imagery, atmospheric 5.1 audio and an engaging chat-track.

TOP PICK

MAD MAX: FURY ROAD

George Miller's 2015 reboot of his legendary post-apocalyptic anti-hero took years to arrive, but it was worth the wait. ...*Fury Road* strips down its narrative to the bare essentials, delivering an exhilarating chase movie that's big on action, carried by Hardy in the title role and Charlize Theron's Imperator Furiosa. It's also visually stunning and blessed with reference-grade sound design.

Get it: Max fans need to double-dip here – get the dual-release 4K edition with both 'Black and Chrome' and full-colour presentations, but also pick up the 1080p 3D outing, which adds sumptuous depth to the desert locations.



Have we missed one of your favourite Tom Hardy performances? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

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Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

All prices quoted are approximate and may have changed

TOP 15 Televisions

01

**Samsung QE65Q9FN** → £3,000 ★★★★★

Revised QLED technology and the implementation of a local dimming backlight reap astonishing picture quality rewards with this bright, colourful 4K HDR hero. Great usability and smart platform, too. *HCC #285*

TOP 5 Blu-ray movies

**The Equalizer 2 [UHD Blu-ray]**

Denzel Washington delivers more vigilante justice in this efficient action sequel. Sony's 4K platter houses a more violent cut than the SDR iteration, and is sonically and visually strong too. *HCC #294*

★★★★★

**Solo: A Star Wars Story [UHD Blu-ray]**

There's a murky quality to some of its visuals, but otherwise this spin-off/prequel is a fun addition to the *Star Wars* franchise. Atmos mix is entertaining; extras are lightweight. *HCC #292*

★★★★★

**Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom [UHD Blu-ray]**

A superb 4K HDR image and stonking DTS:X soundmix make this dino sequel a home cinema crowd-pleaser, even if much of the story feels like a rehash of previous ideas. *HCC #292*

★★★★★

**Mission: Impossible – Fallout [UHD Blu-ray]**

This 4K release is a bit up and down when it comes to visuals, but audio is excellent and the franchise itself shows no sign of a drop in quality. Premium-class popcorn fun. *HCC #293*

★★★★★

**Ant-Man and the Wasp [UHD Blu-ray]**

Smaller scale thrills following *Avengers: Infinity War*, but not less enjoyable, and Disney's 4K transfer is clean, crisp and colourful. A chat track is the pick of the extras. *HCC #293*

★★★★★

02



Philips 65OLED903 → £3,500 ★★★★★

Take impressive audio from a B&W-designed speaker array, OLED-delivered 4K HDR visuals that outshine the competition, and add a sprinkle of Ambilight, and you get the most exciting display Philips has ever released. HCC #290

03



Panasonic TX-65FZ852 → £3,000 ★★★★★

4K HDR OLED (with HDR10+ support) that offers subtlety and refinement in shades (particularly with colour presentation and near-black handling), making up for a slight lack of dynamic punch. Unobtrusive design, too. HCC #290

04



Samsung QE85Q900R

→ £15,000 ★★★★★

It's frighteningly expensive and you won't find any native content to play on it, but Samsung's 85in 8K debutant still wows. Ultra bright and an excellent upscaler of 4K sources. An upgrade to HDMI 2.1 is promised. HCC #292

05



LG OLED65E8

→ £4,300 ★★★★★

This Dolby Vision-enabled OLED boosts image quality on last year's E7 (it's brighter, for one thing), although its Atmos sonics are a tad less impressive. Tidy design and excellent UI. HCC #287

06



Philips 43PUS6753

→ £430 ★★★★★

Sharp, colour-rich, direct-LED images, plus Ambilight and Philips' bespoke SAPHI smart system, make this 43in 4K HDR LCD a smallscreen(ish) dream. Superb option for a second-room/budget setup. HCC #291

07



Sony KD-55AF9

→ £3,000 ★★★★★

Pricier than most 55in OLED rivals, but this Master Series Sony has a unique style, effective 'invisible' audio solution, Dolby Vision/Atmos support and lush 4K visuals. Good new Android OS, too. HCC #292

08



Sony KD-55XF9005

→ £1,700 ★★★★★

Impressive backlighting, dynamic HDR images and top-quality motion processing are the major draws of this mid-tier Bravia. Android OS still needs improvement, though. HCC #285

09



Samsung QE65Q8DN

→ £2,900 ★★★★★

Not as bright as Samsung's top-of-the-range Q9 (and with fewer dimming zones) but still an impactful 4K HDR performer. Excellent HD upscaling, and native motion handling is also solid. HCC #291

10



Hisense H75U9A

→ £3,500 ★★★★★

This 75in LED is the brightest display we've seen, yielding benefits with HDR content, while backlit illumination aids black levels. Sharpness and colour delivery are less impressive, but the price/size ratio is good. HCC #289

11



Loewe Bild 3.55

→ £2,800 ★★★★★

Loewe's entry-level 55in OLED TV offers an artful fusion of design and performance (with decent sonics). Not the best selection of integrated smarts, though, and some rivals are cheaper. HCC #283

12



Hisense 55U7A

→ £800 ★★★★★

FIFA-branded 4K HDR flatscreen that makes up for a lack of HDR brightness through its image clarity and solid black levels. Strong audio and a clutter-free smart platform sweeten the deal. HCC #287

13



TCL 55DC748

→ £700 ★★★★★

While this budget UHD LCD can look bright, detailed and colour-rich, its whole-frame dimming engine and absence of motion compensation count against it. The JBL soundbar is a little underpowered. HCC #289

14



Sony KD-55XF8505

→ £1,100 ★★★★★

This mid-tier edge-lit Sony set has its strengths, particularly its onboard audio and bright room/bright content playback. But a limited contrast means it never feels overly cinematic. HCC #287

15



Hitachi 75HL16T64U

→ £1,350 ★★★★★

This 75in megascreen offers a lot of 4K image for not a lot of money. Predictably, picture quality can't match that of big-brand rivals – but the TV holds appeal if you're mainly after an SDR display. HCC #285

TOP 15 Speaker systems

01



Bowers & Wilkins 700 Series 5.1

→ £3,800 ★★★★★

This array finds the larger models in the 700 Series proving their mettle with formidable power and precision, an expressive mid-band and detailed highs. Excellent. HCC #285

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Photo courtesy of Gary J. Fernandez Limited



02 M&K Sound IW150 5.1 →£8,550 ★★★★★
The in-wall IW150 speakers offer the transparency and detail of a professional studio monitor in an enclosure that can vanish. This array adds driver-matched on-wall tripole surrounds and M&K's fearless X12 sub. The result is outstanding. *HCC #289*



03 Wharfedale DX-2 →£450 ★★★★★
The asking price of this 5.1 system will tell you it doesn't offer the last word in surround sound fidelity, but Wharfedale's package is compact, well made and faultlessly delivers on its home-cinema-on-a-budget promise. *HCC #283*



04 Monitor Audio Gold 300AV →£7,150 ★★★★★
This big-ticket package excels across the frequency range, offers exquisite design and packs setup flexibility via the dipole/monopole FX surrounds. *HCC #251*



05 KEF Q Series 5.1.2 →£3,300 ★★★★★
KEF's revamped Q Series now offers Atmos modules for an up-to-the-minute sonic experience. Big, bold-looking speakers. Robust, immersive audio. *HCC #280*



06 ATC HTS7 5.1 →£3,500 ★★★★★
Brit brand ATC rejigs the driver tech and neutral sound of its SCM range into a wall-mountable, flexible system perfect for discreet AV setups. *HCC #275*



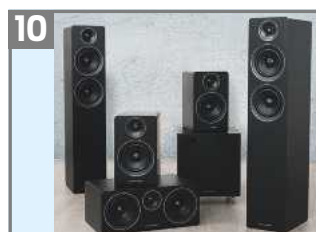
07 Elipson Prestige Facet 7.2.4 →£3,500 ★★★★★
13 cabinets come together to create a great-value and immersive Dolby Atmos array. Rich in fidelity and neutrality; modern styling is another plus point. *HCC #291*



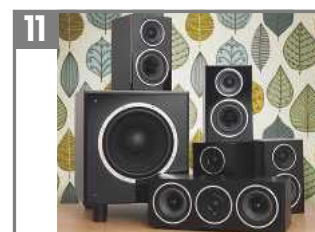
08 Q Acoustics 3050i →£1,350 ★★★★★
This update on the previous 3000 series makes subtle performance and styling improvements. The result is an excellent, well-priced, stylish package. *HCC #287*



09 Monitor Audio Silver 500 5.1 →£3,650 ★★★★★
The new Silver range offers a potent EQ-able sub, sweet design, dipole surrounds and largescale, nuanced sonics. Atmos upfiring models would be nice, though. *HCC #282*



10 Acoustic Energy 100 Series 5.1 →£1,300 ★★★★★
Acoustic Energy's latest addition scores well on style, ease of install and price, and puts in a consistently entertaining multichannel performance. *HCC #286*



11 Wharfedale Diamond 11 HCP →£800 ★★★★★
Bookshelf speakers and 10in sub combine in a system that offers mid-range and treble finesse and a healthy dollop of boisterous bass. Fun and affordable. *HCC #279*



12 Klipsch Reference 5.1.2 →£2,000 ★★★★★
Not the sleekest-looking speakers but Klipsch's array sounds big, bold and cohesive and is easy to drive. Solid subwoofer, too. *HCC #293*



13 Q Acoustics 7000i 5.1 Slim →£1,000 ★★★★★
Consistent tonality and detail retrieval are the standout elements here, joined by a cute, easy-to-accommodate design – particularly the 7060S sub. *HCC #284*



14 Jamo S Series 5.1.2 →£1,120 ★★★★★
An affordable package with drop-dead gorgeous styling, neat Atmos module integration and involving sonics – but the 8in sub isn't a beast. *HCC #290*



15 Focal Sib Evo Dolby Atmos 5.1.2 →£1,200 ★★★★★
Enjoyable-sounding and well-priced sub/sat system with Atmos upfiring in front L/R enclosures. Not the smallest 'satellite' speakers around. *HCC #276*

TOP 10 Projectors



01 Sony VPL-VW760ES → £15,000 ★★★★★

This premium beamer adds laser illumination to Sony's 4K SXRD projection technology, and the results are staggering. It's not super-bright, but images are detailed, vivid and supremely well-balanced. Worthy of flagship status. HCC #283



02 JVC DLA-X5900 → £4,000 ★★★★★

An outstanding performer at this price point. JVC's latest D-ILA model may lack native 4K silicon but its eShift 4K engine shows real improvement and HDR playback has been greatly boosted too. A compelling home cinema PJ. HCC #282



03 Optoma UHD51 → £1,500 ★★★★★

This affordable 4K DLP model adds 3D playback (at 1080p) to its home cinema repertoire, making it an obvious upgrade for stereoscopy fans. Sharp, colour-rich and dynamic visuals. HCC #287



NEW ENTRY

04 Sony VPL-VW270ES → £5,000 ★★★★★

Sony has refined the performance of its entry-level 4K PJ, improving contrast and HDR delivery, ensuring cinematic thrills. Bonus features include motorised controls and 3D playback. HCC #293



NEW ENTRY

05 Epson EH-TW7400 → £2,200 ★★★★★

HLG playback is missing from the spec sheet but otherwise this 4K upscaling LCD PJ hits all the right notes. Setup tools include lens memory presets; images are bright, colourful and contrast-rich. HCC #293



06 Vivitek HK2288 → £2,500 ★★★★★

The Taiwanese brand returns to the UK with a 4K DLP PJ that balances impressive HDR brightness with stable images. Excellent remote control and decent zoom and throw options. HCC #285



07 BenQ TK800 → £1,200 ★★★★★

A lot of enjoyable performance crammed into a compact package. Offers 4K HDR playback, plus 3D, with only a limited black level and occasionally pushed colours counting against. HCC #288



08 Optoma UHZ65 → £5,000 ★★★★★

The asking price here reflects Optoma's addition of laser illumination (yielding improved contrast and far greater 'lamp' life) to the DLP 4K and HDR playback talents of its stablemates. HCC #282



09 Acer VL7860 → £3,500 ★★★★★

Laser 4K DLP projector that misses out on the contrast performance of some models, but undercuts them in terms of pricing. Use the Silent mode for whisper-quiet operation. HCC #284



10 BenQ W1050 → £500 ★★★★★

There are a few cut corners on this budget DLP 1080p model (no backlight on the remote, no lens shift, a meagre zoom), but overall movie performance is good for the money. HCC #283

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TOP 10 Blu-ray players



NEW ENTRY

Pioneer UDP-LX800 → £2,200 ★★★★★

A phenomenal universal disc spinner, which adds audiophile-grade music playback to its 4K BD talents. Includes Dolby Vision support, with HDR10+ promised via future firmware. Build quality is staggering. HCC #293



Panasonic DP-UB9000 → £850 ★★★★★

Supporting both HDR10+ and Dolby Vision, and incorporating useful image adjustments, this premium player is at the leading edge of UHD BD playback. The astonishing construction and provision of VOD apps heighten its appeal. HCC #292



Sony UBP-X800 → £270 ★★★★★

Sony embraces UHD Blu-ray with a full-width, sturdy design that'll also spin DVD-A and SACD platters. A great all-rounder, but no current Dolby Vision support or word on an update. HCC #274



Sony UBP-X700 → £250 ★★★★★

A compact player promised a DV update this Summer, the UBP-X700 has a nondescript design, no analogue outs and a stubby remote. But it plays great, and offers SACD support. HCC #284



Cambridge Audio CXUHD → £800 ★★★★★

The lack of analogue outputs is a surprise considering CA's heritage, but this universal (and DV-capable) deck sounds sweet over its digital outs. As with Oppo's UDP-203, a MediaTek SoC is used. HCC #279



Panasonic DP-UB420 → £250 ★★★★★

Hi-res file support and HDR10+ compatibility make up for this deck's lightweight build and basic streaming app provision (no 4K support at the time of our review). Plenty of user tweaks. HCC #291



Panasonic DMP-UB700 → £300 ★★★★★

Shorn of some of the audiophile niceties of the UB900 (including multichannel analogue outputs), but still a safe pair of hands with your 4K BDs. And at a bargain price. HCC #270



Panasonic DMP-UB300 → £130 ★★★★★

Great 4K imagery from this bargain deck, but you might prefer to up your budget for the UB700 – no split HDMI, optical/coaxial or Wi-Fi connections here. Half-size design for an easy install. HCC #272



Samsung UBD-K8500 → £180 ★★★★★

Debut Ultra HD Blu-ray player that finds fans courtesy of its sensible price point (now even lower), connected smarts and eye-catching visuals. Build quality is a little uninspiring. HCC #260



Samsung UBD-M9500 → £230 ★★★★★

Second-gen 4K player that adds features (mobile BD streaming, 360-degree image support) but removes 3D playback capability. As before, the chassis is curved. UHD discs look pin-sharp. HCC #275



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Photo courtesy of Gary J. Fernandez Limited

TOP 10 AV Receivers/AV Processors

01



NEW ENTRY

Denon AVR-X4500H → £1,500 ★★★★★

Denon's top-tier nine-channel AVR is due an IMAX Enhanced update shortly, topping off an already extensive, user-friendly feature set. Movie playback is dynamic and detailed, and two-channel music sounds sweet too. Superb. HCC #293



02



Arcam AVR850 → £4,500 ★★★★★

High-end seven-channel AVR marrying Class G amplification and Atmos support with talented Dirac Live Room EQ for an excellent performance. Lacks a few feature frills, but 11-channel pre-outs allow full-fat setups. HCC #257



03



Denon AVC-X8500H

→ £3,300 ★★★★★

For those who want to go even bigger with their Atmos/DTS:X system, this flagship provides 13 channels of power. Setup can be complex, and there's no FM tuner, but otherwise this is first-class. HCC #285

04



Yamaha CX-A5200

→ £2,600 ★★★★★

11-channel processor with MusicCast integration, XLR hookup and a trio of HDMI outs. Atmos and DTS:X support is bolstered by impressive Surround:AI DSP. Flexible and enjoyable. HCC #292

05



Marantz AV8805

→ £3,600 ★★★★★

The most affordable 13-channel processor around, the AV8805 combines lean looks, setup flexibility and a musical, detailed sound performance. Uses Audyssey MultEQ XT32 calibration. HCC #288

06



Sony STR-DN1080

→ £550 ★★★★★

Sony is back in the AVR game with a first Atmos model that adds worthy phantom rear speaker processing to its 5.1.2 sonics. A few UI niggles don't take much of the shine off an impressive budget buy. HCC #277

07



NEW ENTRY

NAD Masters Series M17 V2

→ £5,500 ★★★★★

Dirac Live replaces Audyssey EQ in this revamped high-end processor; 4K HDR passthrough, Atmos and DTS:X decoding, and BluOS music streaming also join the party. HCC #293

08



NAD T 777 V3

→ £2,500 ★★★★★

Dirac-enabled seven-channel AV receiver (with 11-channel processing). Powerful, even-handed sonics and wonderfully easy to use, but a firmware update is still awaited for DTS:X decoding. HCC #285

09



Pioneer VSX-933

→ £470 ★★★★★

An affordable seven-channel AVR where copious music streaming options are joined by a punchy, upbeat home cinema performance. Improved remote and menus, but only one HDMI output. HCC #292

10



NEW ENTRY

IOTAVX AVXP1

→ £1,050 ★★★★★

Brit brand power amplifier with plenty of Class AB grunt (rated at 7 x 110W into 8 ohms) and a rugged build quality – one to audition if your cinema setup is in need of more channels. HCC #293

TOP 5 Bonus features



Behind the Fallout

This seven-part documentary looking at the making of *Mission Impossible: Fallout*'s astonishing stunts (including one cut from the final film) is a great accompaniment to Tom Cruise's latest blockbuster. HCC #293

★★★★★



Verhoeven Versus Verhoeven

A detailed documentary from 2016 celebrating the filmmaker's lengthy and controversial career – you'll find it on Eureka's recent *Flesh + Blood* Blu-ray release. HCC #289

★★★★★



Ghost Stories: Directors' commentary

Directing/writing duo Andy Nyman and Jeremy Dyson provide a superb chat track for their spooky anthology flick, highlighting the movie's countless Easter Eggs. HCC #289

★★★★★



Deadpool 2 commentary

Star Ryan Reynolds, director David Leitch and writers Rhett Reese and Paul Wernick team up for this detail-packed but also light-hearted chat track for the recent superhero sequel Blu-ray release. HCC #291

★★★★★



All Eyes on Lenzi: The Life and Times of the Exploitation Titan

Wonderful 84-minute documentary focusing on Italian director Umberto Lenzi, included on 88 Films' new BD release of 1975 flick *Eyeball*. HCC #291

★★★★★

TOP 10 Subwoofers



01 SVS SB-2000 → £800 ★★★★★

This follow up to the SB-1000 offers immense value for money. A mid-sized woofer that imbues Blu-rays with quick, taut and potent LFE, it's a perfect introduction to what a truly good sub can accomplish. *HCC #233*



02 REL No.25 → £6,500 ★★★★★

REL celebrates its 25th anniversary in style with this 15in/1,000W premium concoction that exhibits exhilarating speed and nuance down to serious depths. Big, but beautiful. *HCC #271*



03 Bowers & Wilkins DB1D

→ £3,750 ★★★★★

This sequel to the DB1 moves EQ to an app and changes driver/amp design. Beautifully controlled performance with depth and detail. Gorgeous bodywork. *HCC #277*



04 JL Audio Fathom f212v2

→ £6,500 ★★★★★

A second outing for JL's 2 x 12in monster, with an increase in power (3,600W) and room EQ improvements among the changes. Sounds as good as you'd imagine. *HCC #261*



05 SVS SB16-Ultra

→ £2,500 ★★★★★

A 16in driver and 1,500W amp combine to give SVS's flagship sealed sub real appeal. Goes low but remains tight and fast. App-assisted EQ and operation. *HCC #270*



06 REL HT/1205

→ £700 ★★★★★

A larger (12in) driver and punchier amp than on the HT/1003 increases LFE enjoyment – but still at a bargain price. Lacks a bit of subtlety though. *HCC #290*



07 REL HT/1003

→ £500 ★★★★★

REL targets film fans with a 10in sub that drops its usual simultaneous high/low-level input to hit a new price point. Power and speed are its strengths. *HCC #286*



08 SVS SB-4000

→ £1,800 ★★★★★

Similar in operation and styling to the SB16-Ultra flagship, but smaller and more affordable. Superior DSP results in a real sense of control. *HCC #284*



09 GoldenEar SuperSub X

→ £1,450 ★★★★★

Four drivers squeezed into a relatively compact design and given plenty of push from a 1,400W amp. Standout traits are impact and depth. *HCC #272*



10 KEF Kube10b

→ £600 ★★★★★

The middle option of KEF's new Kube range packs a 10in driver, 300W Class D amp and 56-bit DSP engine to maintain efficient low-frequency control. *HCC #283*

TOP 5 Console games



Red Dead Redemption II

Rockstar Games' years-in-the-making Wild West action/puzzler prequel offers a mammoth open-world gaming experience with excellent attention to detail. Fantastic five-star fun, despite muted visuals. *HCC #293*

★★★★★



F1 2018

HDR grading adds visual allure to Codemasters' latest racing sim, while various tweaks to the career mode loosen the straitjacket approach of previous years and make it easier for novices. Hooray! *HCC #290*

★★★★★



Marvel's Spider-Man

Swing around New York City in this joyous, bright and colourful superhero tie-in. Graphically rich, with intuitive gameplay and fast, free-flowing combat. A suitably epic score completes an excellent all-round package. *HCC #291*

★★★★★



Jurassic World: Evolution

Wanna run your own dinosaur-filled theme park? This addictive and time-stealing movie tie-in lets you do just that. Challenging final levels make up for a lack of variety. Excellent 4K visuals on next-gen consoles. *HCC #288*

★★★★★



Shadow of the Tomb Raider

Lara's back and she means business in this lengthy, stealth-tastic puzzle adventure from Square Enix. The best *Tomb Raider* title yet, and gorgeous to look at. *HCC #292*

★★★★★

TOP 10 Accessories

**KEF R50** → £600 ★★★★★

KEF's Dolby Atmos-enabled reflective modules are a smart choice to beef up a system. Using the company's Uni-Q point source drivers pays dividends, enabling full-range sonics that reach deep into your cinema room. First-rate build. *HCC #252*

**Yamaha WX-AD10** → £150 ★★★★★

Simple to use, unobtrusive add-on that brings MusicCast multiroom/hi-res streaming to legacy AV gear via 3.5mm/phono. Not a bad price – only available in grey, unfortunately. *HCC #274*

**Nvidia Shield Android TV**

→ £180 ★★★★★

The Android-based streamer/gaming box gets a gentle revamp – same silicon, neater design, new features including future support for Google Assistant. Slick and easy to use.

HCC #272**Roku Streaming Stick+**

→ £70 ★★★★★

If a simple life is your aim, this content-rich, 4K/HDR-capable dongle from the streaming specialist is your friend. Idiot-proof interface and control. Good price.

HCC #282**Panasonic SC-GA10**

→ £230 ★★★★★

Panasonic partners with Google Assistant for its debut smart speaker, and doesn't forget to focus on sonic power as well as AI fun. Pricier than many rivals, but still appealing.

HCC #284**Edifier S350DB**

→ £250 ★★★★★

Active 2.1 speaker system that's a fine alternative to a soundbar, with good bass integration and effects separation. No HDMI hookup and retro styling, but easy to setup and use.

HCC #291**Apple TV 4K**

→ £180 (32GB) ★★★★★

With Apple's iTunes movie store offering 4K HDR (Dolby Vision) movies at the same price as Full HD downloads, this compact media player (irritating handset aside) is sure to tempt.

HCC #284**Synology DS119j**

→ £95 ★★★★★

Entry-level single-bay NAS (you'll need to add your own HDD) that benefits from Synology's impressive DSM operating system. Quick to get up and running, versatile and smart-looking. *HCC #292*

**Systemline S7 Netlink Music Player**

→ £700 ★★★★★

Stereo streamer with integrated services including BBC Radio at better-than-usual quality. Installation flexibility makes up for the prosaic design. *HCC #290*

**Amazon Echo Sub**

→ £120 ★★★★★

This nicely styled bass bin to supplement Amazon's Echo speakers adds notable punch to streamed music and makes a 2.1 Dot system good value. Lacks subtlety and is overbearing with speech radio, though. *HCC #293*

TOP 5 Blu-ray/DVD boxsets

**William Castle at Columbia: Volume One**

Four gimmick-filled spine-tinglers (including 1960's part-anaglyph 3D *13 Ghosts*) are joined by a typically brilliant selection of extras in Indicator's deluxe package. *HCC #294*

★★★★★

**The Expanse: Season Two**

This second helping of superior TV sci-fi benefits from more bonus material than before, while the 1080p visuals and DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundmixes for the 13 episodes are uniformly excellent. *HCC #293*

★★★★★

**X-Men: 3-Film Collection [Ultra HD Blu-ray]**

Fox digs into its *X-Men* vault for a 4K triple-pack, introducing Wolverine, Magneto *et al.* No remixed audio and some AWOL extras, but the boosted image quality appeals. *HCC #292*

★★★★★

**Batman: The Complete Animated Series**

All 109 episodes of Fox's groundbreaking 'toon have been meticulously restored for this BD boxset. Among the copious extras is a new 98-minute *Making of...* doc. *HCC #293*

★★★★★

**Legends of Tomorrow: Complete Third Season**

The latest run for DC's Arrowverse spin-off is a weird, wacky treat – and far more enjoyable and humour-packed than its parent shows. DTS-HD 5.1 mixes are solid, too. *HCC #292*

★★★★★

TOP 10 Soundbars & Soundbases



01 Samsung HW-N950 → £1,500 ★★★★★

The latest and greatest soundbar system to arrive from Samsung's US-based Audio Lab, the HDMI-equipped N950 crafts a dynamic, detailed and immersive 7.1.4 Atmos/DTS:X soundfield without cluttering your room. HCC #290



02 Canton DM55 → £240 ★★★★★

Canton's smallest soundbase still delivers big sonic thrills. Twin woofers underpin clean and crisp mids and highs, and build quality is first-rate. Doddle to use. Bluetooth built-in. HCC #260



03 Yamaha YSP-5600SW → £1,900 ★★★★★

With its 46 drivers (including upfiring) this premium 'bar delivers precisely steered and immersive audio, even of the Atmos variety. Potent wireless sub and 4K-capable HDMI switching sweeten the high-end deal. HCC #254



04 Denon HEOS Bar → £570 ★★★★★

Multiroom-ready and app-controllable, this premium single-enclosure model offers powerful, detailed and warm sonics in spades. Can be expanded into a 5.1 system with extra HEOS hardware. HCC #287



05 Q Acoustics M3 → £300 ★★★★★

A 4in x 6in woofer is tucked away in the M3's eye-catching angular chassis, ensuring this well-priced soundbar has a full-range performance. Simple to use. Bluetooth streaming. HCC #271



06 LG SK10Y → £1,200 ★★★★★

High-price but high-performance, LG's Atmos-enabled soundbar system is large in scale, rich in bass and offers 4K HDMI switching. Over 1.4m wide, so won't suit all setups. HCC #288



07 Sony HT-ZF9 → £650 ★★★★★

This 3.1-channel soundbar handles Dolby Atmos streams and promises enveloping sonics via DSP trickery. The result isn't noticeable overhead audio, but a wide, high and exciting performance. HCC #289



08 JBL Bar Studio → £150 ★★★★★

No subwoofer here, just a fairly compact stereo 'bar that offers a useful soundstage-widening 'Surround' mode, HDMI ARC connectivity, and a decent performance for the price. HCC #284



09 Q Acoustics M2 → £300 ★★★★★

Easily accommodated in/on AV furniture, and packing HDMI ARC for a simple hookup, this BMR-driver/built-in woofer soundbase impresses with its energetic delivery and price. HCC #279



10 Panasonic SC-HTB258 → £150 ★★★★★

When space is tight, this oh-so compact 'bar (plus slim sub) will do the job. Bass is well-defined and dialogue strong, but the soundstage is narrow. Connections are HDMI ARC, Bluetooth and optical. HCC #279

TOP 5 Back-catalogue Blu-rays



Night of the Demon: Limited Edition

Jacques Tourneur's 1957 supernatural classic gets a devilishly good BD release from Indicator, with three different cuts spread across two discs, plus a mass of extras. HCC #292 ★★★★★



Candyman: Limited Edition

Some detective work from Arrow Video sees the UK theatrical edit of this Clive Barker adaptation debuting on Blu-ray, in addition to the US cut. Image quality is superb, and there are new and archival bonus bits. HCC #292 ★★★★★



Hackers

This 1995 internet thriller starring Angelina Jolie has a devoted cult following that will appreciate 88 Films' new Blu-ray – a lively DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix is joined by a retrospective doc and chat track from Mark Kermode. HCC #294 ★★★★★



The Lion King [UHD Blu-ray]

4K HDR presentation and Dolby Atmos remix means this is comfortably the best Disney's classic 'toon has looked or sounded on home media. A few missing extras, though. HCC #294 ★★★★★



Braveheart [UHD Blu-ray]

Fox delivers an utterly gorgeous image here, courtesy of a 4K scan of original negatives, and boosts the beauty of James Horner's score via an Atmos makeover. A worthwhile revisit of Mel Gibson's historical epic. HCC #294 ★★★★★

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TOP 5 PVRs



Virgin Media TiVo, £subscription

This triple-tuner PVR offers recording flexibility, useful features – you can undelete deleted shows! – and smart TiVo functionality. If you're in a cable area, consider it

★★★★★



Sky Q, £subscription

Sky's new top-tier product offering dazzles with its image-rich user interface, wireless multiroom skills and recording flexibility delivered by the PVR's 12 tuners. Now supports 4K content

★★★★★



Humax FVP-5000T

Revamped menus, faster operation and tweaks to its triple-tuner engine make this the most advanced Freeview Play PVR around – and it doubles admirably as a DLNA player/media jukebox. 500GB/1TB/2TB

★★★★★



Humax DTR-T4000, £subscription

This YouView-based PVR is required to get BT Sport's new Ultra HD channel – available to those with BT fast fibre and a BT TV sub. Easy to use and with 1TB of storage

★★★★★



Manhattan T2-R, £120

The 500GB HDD and twin-tuner spec of this Freeview HD PVR is basic, but Manhattan's new hardware design, user interface (and the price tag) are appealing. Easy to use.

★★★★★

TOP 5 Headphones



NEW ENTRY

JBL Tune600BTNC, £85

A commendable budget option from JBL, with closed-back, comfortable ear-cups, reasonably effective noise-cancelling, Bluetooth hookup, and a presentation with a good sense of scale and impact

★★★★★



Nuraphones, £350

Unusual over-ear/in-ear hybrid cans that measure the acoustic response of your inner ear to fine-tune performance. It's a highly impressive trick, but the design can make these a bit uncomfortable to wear

★★★★★



1More MK802, £150

Ignore the bling-tastic blue or red finishes and focus on the assured sound performance from these well-priced closed-back cans. Features include wireless Bluetooth and app control (with burn-in mode). Great value

★★★★★



Bowers & Wilkins PX, £330

B&W adds noise-cancelling to the general spec of its previous P7 wireless cans, a welcome update for those seeking uninterrupted listening. Offers a neutral, balanced sound suited to both movies and music

★★★★★



Audio Technica ATH-SR9, £400

45mm drivers and Audio Technica's Midpoint Mount tech deliver wide, deep, spacious sonics. Memory foam padding aids listener comfort; 3m cable should suit most AV setups

★★★★★

TOP 5 Wireless speakers



KEF Muo, £300

Portable Bluetooth speaker that's a cut above much of the competition. KEF's sonic knowhow results in a punchy, dynamic presentation that cherishes lossless rips. Excellent build quality

★★★★★



Yamaha MusicCast 50, £450

New to Yamaha's multiroom stable is this stereo desktop speaker with a clean, balanced delivery, neat aesthetic and control via the brand's rock-solid and well-stocked app.

★★★★★



Dynaudio Music 7, £875

Top-of-the-range multiroom option from Dynaudio, this sizable speaker creates a full-range, detailed soundstage. Music App offers useful adjustments and EQ modes. Inputs include HDMI (ARC)

★★★★★



Airpulse Audio A200, £800

Monitor-style active speakers offering physical and wireless hookups, a premium build and a sweet yet weighty sound delivered by ribbon tweeters and 5.5in midbass drivers

★★★★★



Denon HEOS 5 HS2, £350

The mid-range multiroom speaker gets a second-gen revamp, adding welcome hi-res audio playback and Bluetooth connectivity. Gorgeous looks, boisterous, room-filling sound

★★★★★

HOME CINEMA

Choice

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Back in the ring We talk *Creed II* with director Steven Caple Jr

→ REVIEWS

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CONTENTS SUBJECT TO CHANGE – BUT ONLY FOR THE BETTER



AV Avenger

Interactive movies are staging a comeback thanks to streaming giant Netflix. But, asks **Steve May**, are they a good idea?

SUGAR PUFFS OR Frosties? If you've recently pondered this choice, then you've probably watched *Bandersnatch*, the interactive *Black Mirror* movie on Netflix. With the help of branching streams, this Charlie Brooker-written mindbender invites you to navigate parallel universes and alternate reality.

Choose your own adventures aren't new. Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone pioneered the genre with their *Fighting Fantasy* books in the 1980s. These tomes invited readers to make narrative choices, usually as part of a quest. For me this involved a tedious amount of back and forth, as I invariably took multiple wrong paths, each leading to a grizzly end. I'm not sure I ever finished one successfully.

Several of these best-sellers were converted into video games for first-gen home computers like the ZX Spectrum, Commodore 64 and BBC Micro. It's this era that *Bandersnatch* recreates.

Stefan Butler is a teen programmer behind the titular interactive adventure game, which he touts to games factory Tuckersoft. Our challenge is to help him finish the game. Yet the film doesn't play in a linear fashion. Stefan is wracked with guilt over his mother's death, has a broken relationship with his father, and teeters on the brink of madness. Will he survive the process?

Brooker weaves sci-fi with horror and conspiracy theory, throws in some witty meta referencing, and delivers something rather special indeed.

Formula fun

Perhaps the most impressive thing about *Bandersnatch* is just how seamless the experience is. There's nary a hiccup as you navigate paths. The running time varies according to the decisions you take – the average length is around 90 minutes, but it can last for over two hours. On a streaming

platform where engagement translates to success, this strikes me as a dream formula, although *Bandersnatch* doesn't work on all Netflix gadgets, as older devices, Chromecast and Apple TV can't pre-cache the choices required for each transition.

Bandersnatch isn't Netflix's first foray into interactive content. The streamer has been quietly seeding its platform with similar kids' fare for a while now, including *Puss in Book: Trapped in an Epic Tale*; *Buddy Thunderstruck: The Maybe Pile* and the *Minecraft: Story Mode* series.

And interactive movies have long been an aspiration of games designers. The early days of interactive disc formats, like 3DO, CD-i and Sega CD, are littered with brave attempts, all ultimately let down by the technology of the time.

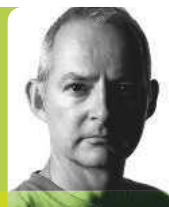
My first interactive movie experience was Don Bluth's LaserDisc-based arcade game, *Dragon's Lair*. Built around basic branching tech, you had to move your joystick left or right, or press the Fire button to progress. **It looked great but was utterly unplayable.** As was its sequel, *Space Ace*.

Both turned up on Philips' CD-i format, and 3DO, a CD-ROM games platform supported by Panasonic. The former boasted impressive MPEG-1 video quality for the time, and attracted considerable interest from interactive creators. *The 7th Guest*, a horror puzzler, hinted at things to come, while live-action Western shooter *Mad Dog McCree* used full-motion video and branching to further gameplay. More recently, games like *Life is Strange*, *Until Dawn* and *The Walking Dead* series have adopted similar techniques.

Bandersnatch, however, spins the idea on its head. Are we witnessing a new bleeding edge for home entertainment? You decide ■

*Do you want to get interactive with your movies?
Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com*

Every now and then **Steve May** thinks it would be fun to get out his old gaming consoles. Then he remembers he threw them away



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